Masks and Eyes

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A FAULT, NOT BLINDLY SELF

1 Grey pigeons, swirling about the dim lamplights of the slowly dissolving city seemed parchment, like pages or flags fluttering in the breeze.

The city itself seemed poisoned and poised against some invisible animal scratching at it ceaselessly. You could hear it in the walls, wallpaper slowly peeling, roses and amaranths cracking and coiling and circling soft slow to the floor, floor likewise cracking to a bland oblivion.

You could feel greying air rust, almost imagine small shimmers of copper bleeding on the wind, and at the sunset, (though it was always sunset now,) you could feel the dark as a physical thing pressing on you with its full weight.

Suffocating.

The pigeons spiralling about the last manmade lights seemed to sigh in passing and with each passing fell further and further to a ground littered with glass, an ocean of spines rising with hungry fingers as each body found itself impaled.

The man at the end remained alone. Neither pigeons nor rats nor cockroaches nor any of the older things remained, leaving him last witness of Earth's decline.

The city was not truly a city of course.

It was a small town, river of a single street meandering up and down along hills between the flattened collection of square and once beautiful buildings clinging to the earth like a second skin.

But as Earth coalesced backward, as continents recoiled into myth slowly the dimensions of the village grew. Suddenly a small square home took on the aspects of a miracle. Suddenly in winter, a pane of glass became a magic thing since there would be no more glass ever after.

So, when the end came and the glass was shattered, when houses were gutted, when the last-before-last perished, leaving pigeons clustered about those final embers of humanity, he gazed it all in regret. Then went for a walk.

The town lay somewhere on the edges of a continent whose name was now forgotten. Behind him lay memories and names also forgotten. There was some crooked alchemy to the world. As each died the survivors felt the empty places in their minds fill out, creating vast territories of blank days and nights.

Books once beloved were now just pages ruined of lines no one could read. Paintings smeared themselves to unrecognizable forms. One could know a face was here, a line, an arm, but no longer remember what the painting symbolized nor recall now if the faces and forms were joyful, angry, bitter. Lost.

The last man left as the sunset continued on, wearing garments whose names he would no longer recall save that they were grey, and as the rains began to fall he forgot even the word for rain. Turning back once the way he came he noticed small rivulets of hair behind and reaching up realized they were his own. He gazed at his hand and idly fidgeted at his fingernails, watching as the nails one by one pried themselves off his fingertips and went sailing to the ground.

Teeth then he reached for and felt as he spit them from his mouth. By now he wasn't sure if he was dreaming or dead but he felt his toes crawl out of his shoes and his fingers fall from outstretched hands. In a forest of stone trees, he watched himself fall apart, skin dissolve or slough off and suddenly he was staring at himself, this thing made of skin vaguely resembling his own features.

But by now he didn't know even what his features were.

He stretched his palm to *it* and it stretched the loose taunt skin of its hand out as he saw his palm fall, soft thud like a broken insect impaled and crushed upon the road.

His arm went next, his arms, then the sky sped up over him and he knew that he had fallen. His legs went crawling away then, two thick caterpillars impotently trying to return the way they came, perishing but a few feet from their master's form. Twitching even at the end.

The creature of skin bent over him, sightless eyes staring into his own. For a moment he wanted to scream without quite knowing why. Then he felt his tongue divest itself from his throat and felt it crawl out of his mouth, a sightless worm going back in the echo of the other pieces of himself. All heading in the direction of his home.

He wanted to scream but even if his tongue had remained, he wouldn't have known what to say.

He had forgotten all things now.

Even his language.

Even his name . . .

2 He awoke, eyes opened as the memory of the creature greeted him. He remembered the forests of stone, their branches twisting upward into the sky and the town and the people.

And his family.

He was sitting in a small grey room writing a letter to his sister on the world's other side and suddenly there came the report of fires blazing in far cities. There had been a war . . . and the end of it.

In a blaze of oblivion words like enemy, friend and lover meant nothing. He went to his wife and daughters and embraced them, watching from his window as the world went away . . . his hand went out and touched the bland obsidian of the dais he was lying upon. And a hand greeted his own.

Turning toward it, he saw . . .

The thing.

He mistook it for a man. The outline was the same but the

number of limbs was wrong. In the dim shadows he realized he was gripping a . . . hand was the wrong word . . . appendage, while two more just like it existed on the same side of the thing's body.

Memories flooded back brokenly into his skull as fear for the first time in forever gripped him.

He tried to scream but no words came.

The form turned toward a light in the distance where there was a hallway. He tried to rise and the form turned toward him, quiet, silent and swift, helping him to rise then helping him to stand. And he noticed a pattern of hexagons on the floor.

A shaft of light crossed along the floor and light and as they passed into it, he saw the thing properly. It did *almost* look like a man but the eyes were jewel black and there were eight of them, two large ovals surrounded by six smaller gems.

Its "hands" were composed of two thick fingers, each three times longer than his. It had no nose and its mouth was but a vertical slit along its face. Pale translucent skin glinted in the light. It said nothing but led him on, and he mutely followed.

For some reason still he couldn't scream.

The hallway branched out into several other rooms, all of them identical to the one he came from. And in each lay a being upon a dais in a domed chamber, all trying to stand.

The creature led him to the door at the end of the hallway. Passing through the black obsidian door, (which was somehow warm to the touch despite everything else being cold,) he was greeted by an impossible sight.

He was standing upon a balcony overlooking another city, though now the proper name clung to the proper place. Vast towers could be seen, all a dull gold like the room he came from, their spires curling up into a violet sky.

Rounded almost spherical buildings could be seen and upon the balcony was a table and two chairs. As he was led to this,

he realized the white chairs were moving, serpentine legs breathing.

They were alive.

So too the circular corpse-white table, slowly pulsing softly with each heartbeat while his fingers rested upon it.

The thing turned to the door and was gone.

As it passed another being emerged and exited into the warm light of the foreign sun. This being crossed the empty smooth floor, heels clicking insectlike against the living stone and took a seat across from the man without even looking at him.

Instead, the figure was staring out at the rising peaks of the towers as they scattered across the scenery.

Then he speaks.

"Do you remember your name?" he asks.

"Steven Norton. My name was . . . is Steven Norton."

"That's good, that's good."

As they talk Steven realizes he can't properly see the man. He sees a deep black shade of shadow before him, featureless, impossible to comprehend.

"Am I in hell?" Steven asks finally, half to the figure and half to the princes of the air.

"No. Though I suppose it can be thought that way sometimes."

"Then where am I?"

"Mars."

And Steven laughs then stops himself, realizing the figure is in deadly earnest.

"This can't be Mars," Steven says. "I can breathe the air, this all feels . . ."

"Like home, yes? Yes, the air is breathable and the gravity is like Earth's. Look in the sky, you should see it by now."

The shadow points upward, Norton's eye following. And a moon is there. Mars should have two moons, small misshapen

pieces of stone barely perceivable from the surface. But this is more. It is the *Moon,* the same as the one that circled the old Earth.

"You should see the face by now."

"Face?"

He strains his eyes and there is a face, or what seems a face, similar to the old man in the moon, but somehow more alien.

"A trick of perspective. I've walked those empty countries once or twice myself. I've seen the pattern of meteorites, how they impacted and where. Your brain makes sense of randomness by creating something understandable. Hence the man in the moon."

"That can't be the *moon,*" Steven says.

"It is. When the asteroids hit one struck off a piece of Earth and let it crash headlong into night. The same way the moon was first formed. The only difference was the Earth was destroyed in the strike. No Earth, just a moon tumbling forever before it was caught and added here. But the Earth you knew is gone. Same as in every other universe, except the one you came from."

"Who the hell are you?" Steven asks. Suddenly shadow is given skin and turning faces Steven and Steven looks back in dread.

He is staring at himself.

"My name is Steven Norton," the shadow says.

3 Beyond the city lay large empty wastelands and between them lingered oceans the colour of wine. The wastelands were the homes of strange primordial things, beasts on spindling legs, thick-bodied like some arcane sigil from a mad painter's eye.

Moths could be seen flying the air, their grey-bronze wings crafting vast shadows, etching them into the ground. One could follow the wind-rider's paths because the shadows of their wings left blunt scrapings behind like footprints of old ammonite gods in the Precambrian soil of an ocean's floor.

Other creatures swam here too.

One could watch serpentine forms struggling in the sand but when the bodies burst outward, upward they were not reptiles but plants. Usually, the shifting of their bodies could be seen but sometimes, only sometimes one would notice a subtler shape. A woman would be seen crossing sands, nakedly appearing however one desired her.

Once one stepped from the bridge they would start to sink in the fine dust sea and soon *she* would come, herself nothing more than an appendage of the things below as you would be dragged into their maw and then buried deep below the sand's skin.

And are then no more.

There were other creatures more terrible but none more cruel, forced to remember in the dying all that you have lost, knowing even your murderer will forget you as you die.

The bridges were the only safe place to stand, a thick road crisscrossing the air, black rivers of roads born from insects who in other lifetimes looked exactly like ordinary women and men.

One could of course have put walls on each side but it would have tripled the material involved and it was discovered that any attempt to do such a thing would trigger the beasts of the earth and the beasts of the sky, to tear the bridge apart.

For whatever reason the strands were left alone only so long as the threat of death lingered with each step the pilgrims took. It was the price of the wastelands, some supposed . . .

Steven Norton, staring face to face with Steven Norton didn't know what else to do but stand. He had an aching need to rise above this reflection but his reflection did likewise, both men now standing, staring, eyes locked with each other.

"Sit down," Steven Norton said then couldn't tell if he had said it or the shadow had.

Both men sat as the conversation began, a conversation

one of them had rehearsed seemingly forever

"Do you need anything to eat?" the shadow who was Norton asked.

"No."

"I know. There's no food coming."

"Then why ask me?"

"What was the first thing you remembered when I mentioned food?"

He mentioned the food he liked the best.

"We all have that same preference. I find it grounds us before the hard part begins."

"Us?"

"Us," the shadow said then went to the balcony. "Come over and look down."

Steven went to the edge and realized how far they were from the ground. The pit below went on forever, black and cold, but he could see people milling about below, like insects.

"They're there, and in other cities and other worlds. Europa is inhabited. So is Venus. I've seen whales the size of small islands skimming a sunless sea and creatures with bone wings riding Venusian clouds. Of course, those names don't exist here. All the planets have different names based on Martian mythology. I'll tell you sometime, but it's not important now."

"They? Who are they?" Norton asked.

"They are us. All of them. Well not quite, but close."

"Are you sure I'm not in hell?" Norton smiled weakly as he asked but the question was not meant as a joke. Not now.

"This isn't hell but from the view of some more primitive age most here I suppose you could call demons. Though they're us. Like I said they're *mostly* us. I know you've studied this before because I studied it back in college. The multiverse. You remember it now, yes?"

"Infinite worlds, infinite possibilities."

"Exactly. Your world, your Earth ended in fire. You were quite literally the last man alive. And that's why you're here. Consider this the city of Steven Norton."

"That thing that I saw though, that . . ."

"Is us. Different evolutionary paths. Different strands of infinite ways. Mind you, he didn't come from Earth. Most don't. In the multiverse Earth, your Earth almost never appears and when it does it almost never has life on it. Of course, when using terms like 'almost never' regarding the infinite it's still vast enough, but we're outliers you and I, exceptions, not the rule."

"How many *us* are in this city?"

"Close to forty million and counting. Most of the Martian cities aren't like this. Most are inhabited by Martians alone though a few have other species, Europans, Venusians, etc. But they always leave cities like this, for us."

"Why?"

"Well, that's hard to explain. Imagine you could walk in a house with a limitless number of rooms but the rooms can only exist when there is someone already dwelling in them. When the last occupant dies the room dies too.

"That universe you came from *you* were the last living thing alive and when you died would have closed that universe off completely. The Martians didn't want that, so they traded someone for you."

"I saw something wearing my skin . . ."

"Always hallucinates differently. I saw myself cut in half, don't know how I could see myself but I did. One woman . . ."

"Woman?"

"Yeah woman, when it happened she felt an extra body grow from off her back, able to see in two directions for a few minutes until the divide was complete."

"And then she came here?"

"Yeah. Like everyone else."

"So, what happens after this?"

"The one who took your place is already starting to form a beachhead. See, they can't do anything until the last one reaches their last end. The door can't be opened any earlier time. But when the beachhead is formed colonists will set out to possess new countries, populate it with new creatures. A genesis from an older world to an empty world."

"How many times have they done this?"

"How many grains of sand are there in the wasteland?"

"And you accept this?"

"It's not as if we have a choice in the matter."

"But you said everyone here is us. How is that possible? We can't all be the last thing in our universes."

"You'd be surprised," he said knowingly." Of course, you're right, we're not always the last. Our wife is out there too you know."

"Our wife?"

"Some versions she's the last survivor. I've been to her city. Their city. Saw a woman who was almost, just almost her. The only difference was she had wings. Otherwise . . . maybe it was just my perspective playing tricks on me."

"My wife is dead in the country I came from."

"Mine too. But like I said there are women almost like her still alive. And you know the Martians don't always send colonists. Sometimes they just pull someone here and let the entire universe close behind them. Let the whole thing evaporate like smoke melting in the rain."

"But my universe still exists."

"Yeah, for now. Maybe they'll keep it or maybe they'll just close it up and seal it away. You can never tell. My universe might have disappeared by now. All the colonists might have left and I could be the last remnant of everything I knew."

"These Martians, what are they like?"

"You mean appearance or personality?"

"Both."

"They look like blue-white sea slugs on these thick iron-coloured legs. You'd think they'd be like Wells' creatures, bloated ugly things but they're quite beautiful. They're aquatic. Hard to imagine most life on this desert dwells in the sea.

"Personality-wise, well they're different."

"Different how?"

"Their language is alien. Different theories about it. Some think their language has no verbs or maybe no nouns or they're missing certain articles of speech. Hard to tell. I've listened to them but even when it comes close to what we're saying something always feels like it's missing. I suppose that describes their personalities too. *Something missing.* Can never tell if they're pleased or angry, just this one blue eye staring at you, voice like the way driftwood sounds against lapping waves. Intelligent, but impossible to tell, except that whatever they lack isn't enough for them to worry about. Not being like us at all."

"And us, most of us aren't human?"

"No. Like I said most Earths are gone and that leaves Mars or Venus or Europa. Most come from there. Mind you, and this is where it gets interesting, even though we can't visit those other alternate versions we can still see them. All of them."

"See what exactly?"

"See *Everything.*"

They passed small clusters of people along the halls. Many looked almost human though there was still something alien about them. They seemed to have no bones, their grey skin rippling as they walked.

Velvet worms, he called them. Wormlike creatures who had evolved on a Mars much different from this one who could spin threads to encircle their prey. Others had shells crumpled

along their bodies like ammonites and their yellow eyes peered directly into Steven's own.

A few had wings. One or two were so alien as to dwarf his mind.

"Bacteria," the other Norton said, "sentient bacteria writ large."

Impossible. But there they were, huddled masses of flesh suddenly forming legs to walk then reverting to their other shape again.

The pair hurried along.

They came into the darkened room and etched upon the walls were pinpoints of light. It seemed like a map of a night's sky.

"Touch one," the other Norton said.

Steven went over and put his hand against a star. And suddenly everything opened itself to him.

He could see a universe blister into life. A trillion galaxies probed the edges of his mind and along each isle of stars were infinite planets and moons. And there was fire upon the deep black waters. He saw it then, two galaxies going to war.

A hundred trillion ships like dragonfly-winged splendour sailed into the void between and set each other alight. He could instantly see each life spool outward, backward, downward, and upward, and he realized that the war he was seeing he had already seen, hadn't seen yet, known before his hand touched the star, would never know after his hand left the light.

And he was there, or one of his alternates was.

It wasn't human. It was like a centipede, a segmented golden thing which seemed to gaze up staring at him, through him, with jewelled eyes.

He released his hand and the vision faded. But not the life.

He realized it then. He hadn't before. All he knew was gone. She was gone, his daughters, his entire planet obliterated in

fire and flood but he hadn't cried. He turned back and the other Norton nodded as if he understood.

Which he did.

"I saw a war," Steven said, "and trillions died. Saw them perish and burn and I can't," he touched his chest, "feel it here anymore. I saw her die and I can't shed a tear. I saw myself there and he will die and I can't," he tapped his chest again, "I can't touch it anymore."

"I know," the other man said, "it's the price we pay. And what they take. Like I said, there's something missing in them. When we come here, we find ourselves missing things too." The other man went to another pinpoint of light and put his hand upon it. "Here, by this point in the universe, the galaxies have receded so far, that the very idea of other galaxies is gone from their minds. He is there, the he that is us. I can see him and I can see that he does not miss what we are missing. Maybe it is the cost of surviving to the end. Or maybe they took it themselves to give themselves some small portion of it. Maybe they are becoming more human the more they take of us and leave us here."

"How many universes are there, that we can see?"

"All of them. Look." He pointed to one small part of the blackened wall. Steven hadn't noticed before that the darkness neither receded nor slowed. It was not a wall but a corridor and he could see more and more points of light emerge as if he were striding down it, even as his feet remained still.

"Like I said we can see *Everything*, the *All*. It's how they know when it is time to pluck a life and leave it here."

And Steven left the room. Norton following.

"What do we do with ourselves then?" Steven asked.

"Some of us paint."

They had descended to the streets below. Crowds milled about, watching a being work. She seemed to have no bones. Her

fingers were burning along a wall and Steven watched as the . . . acid, or some sort of thread, tore into stone, creating a mural. A portrait.

Of his wife.

No. It wasn't her. But it was. His perspective was wrong but despite the eyes, the mouth, he could tell it was her.

It was always her.

"Others write."

They had moved past the onlookers and were now in a café of some sort. The other Norton motioned to a woman to come forth. The woman though, she looked like Steven.

No that was impossible. She had extra arms, and . . . was that a tail?

"It's happening, isn't it?" Norton asked.

"What's happening?"

"You're starting to see them as they are. Starting to see them as you."

The café was a small dim space and the pair sat beside a window gazing out at the passersby. And the longer Steven looked the more familiar everyone seemed. He could still notice their wings, their eyes, the armour adorning their skin but superimposed upon the image of them was another.

Was himself.

"Some write?" Steven asked.

"Oh yes. We have quite the library. The Martians give us paper, pen, ink, and other things our alternates need and let us get to work. Of course, the door they open doesn't simply allow them access to the last moments but to every moment. You noticed that?"

"I did."

"So, they can observe and record all our literature, our history, our sciences, everything. All those lost masterpieces taken in fire and flood."

"Why do you do that?" Steven asked.

"Do what?"

"Try to sound smarter than we are."

"How old do you think I am?" Norton asked.

"I don't know. Same age as myself I guess."

"As of tomorrow, I will be four. *Million.* Nine. Hundred. *Thousand* years old." Taken back Steven glanced at the other peoples scattered across the city.

"How?"

"You asked why I sound like this? I've been practicing all my lives. Sometimes I try to sound warmer, other times try to sound colder. Or wiser, or crueller, or more kind."

"Always you? Aren't there others to do this?"

"Oh yes, several thousand. But I am closest to you in appearance. We have spiders, scorpions, velvet worms and things you don't have words for yet doing this job, leading new initiates, so to speak. Eventually, you'll be settled here and given a few rooms and a career and canvas and paper and clay and stone and you will spend your days quietly bringing it all back from your head. All the days which were and all the people you've known.

"Like I said, some write. Some sculpt. And at the end of our life, we perish, we bleed and then we awaken here again. As children. We grow, we live, we die. Again. *And again.* Lost count of how many times I've died."

"Why?"

"So long as we exist some portion of the other universes remain, some thin thread. At first, we thought we were made immortal to keep the doors open and let them occupy those shores forever. But we were wrong. We're immortal because they don't want to see the last of an entire creation vanish without a trace.

"We're the only ones left Steven. We're the only witness to our homes.

"So, they give us all we need to make legacies, tomes,

statues and they keep us occupied. We have jobs. You'll be assigned a task, something to do. Depending on your skill set you can be a waiter or a lawyer. A cop."

"There are police here?"

"Of course. We're still people and people commit crimes. People make mistakes. We're not saints."

"So, if I was a police officer I'd be arresting myself?"

"More or less. Of course, certain crimes are impossible now. Murder is impossible. So is rape."

"Because we can't screw ourselves over?"

"No, because none of us were rapists before. Whatever they took, whatever is missing doesn't influence our morality. I've been to cities where rape was a real concern. But not here."

"I always thought everyone had the same propensity for violence."

"When you're the only one in an entire city and you've never killed or raped anyone before why would you start now?"

Steven glanced out the window at the slowly coalescing forms of himself. They weren't all him, not really. Different evolutions had driven different outcomes. Gender divided them. Later he would learn gender was not simply a matter of male or female but rather a continuum of myriad possibilities.

"What crimes do we commit usually?"

"You're really stuck on that idea, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, theft is a problem. Since we share a lot of similarities it's sometimes difficult remembering who owns what. And we have fights here. Conflicts. Some of the young ones, those barely older than fifty thousand years have a hard time adjusting. Some become antisocial. They can be violent."

"Anything else?"

"Well . . . no, no nothing else."

"What aren't you telling me?" Steven asked.

"There is one crime but I don't have a word for it that you'd understand."

"Try me."

"It's like identity theft"

"We had that in my universe."

"No, it's when someone is convinced they are someone else. When someone arrives here and is convinced they aren't, well aren't *us,* even when they clearly are. The closest term would be a fugue state."

"That's a crime?"

"Yeah, and a danger. Like I said, we don't rape. And the odds of someone arriving who thinks they're not us is rare but when it happens you have to watch out for that person. Because then anything could happen."

"These people, what is done to them?"

"Do you mean do we lock them up or execute them? No. Prison for immortal beings is worse than hell. And . . . well like I said, immortal beings. No, we ship them to another city, one closer in personality to their new temperament. It's safer that way. Anyone not us has to be taken somewhere else, Steven."

"And these other cities are okay with that?"

"Usually, we take them to a Martian city or Europan. So yeah, they don't mind. Everyone there is already different, unique, one of a kind. Nobody minds. And when they die, they simply cycle back there instead of arriving here. Everyone's happy."

"Everyone?"

"Everyone who counts," Norton said. "So, we'll have a nice meal," and at the word suddenly dishes appeared, "we'll talk about the way things used to be and later you'll get your rooms, your job, your new life. Any questions?"

"Yeah, what did she just give us? I don't know what this is."

"Get used to that feeling," Norton said, "you're going to

experience it a lot."

Then the two sat and had their meal together. In silence.

4 A man was sitting from across him, man who was himself.

In appearance, he had six eyes and small pits of silver armour covered his arms. The "man" had spun these pieces along his body, blue skin tinted now of silver. He had three arms. A fourth had been torn off during the war, (it was never explained which war,) and three fingers to each hand slowly inched along the table. Subconsciously. The way small worms might.

Steven could see him now, both as he was and as he seemed to be. The image of the blue-skinned creature occupied only a portion of Steven's mind. Imposed upon this was his own face as he was subtly staring at himself. Yet he could see the extra limb and bright circle of jet-black eyes.

"Are you certain about this?" Norton asked.

"I am. It was my job back home. I almost remember it."

The man at the table reached into his desk and handed Steven a small coil of metal, a spiral seemingly of gold.

"Your symbol," the man said.

"Thank you."

Of course, the badge was only the first small step. But unlike in the world he knew, there would not be a great emphasis upon tests or means of verifying his psychology by some external judgement. After all each person in the city of Norton could have done exactly what he was doing now.

It was only that he desired it when so many others did not.

"Welcome to your first day Officer Steven Norton," the man said.

Without realizing it Steven saluted and then watched as the man regarded him quizzically.

"A gesture from home," Norton said.

The man nodded knowingly as if he understood then

stood and raised his third hand, palms spread toward Steven. Without knowing it Steven nodded knowingly as well and Steven and Norton left the room.

5 Steven stood in the middle of the street with the symbol of the spiral clutched in his hand. Norton stood behind him, waiting.

The streets surged about him, people passing by. Some were human, others had wings or extra eyes or skin the colour of sunsets. And Steven closed his eyes.

He reached backward, walking day to day behind himself until he stood at the crossroads with the stone trees clustered about him. Then took a step further back. Further back.

He was in a small town watching the eternal sunset in reverse and the dead slowly come to life again, his wife's smile etched along his memory.

He turned from her eyes and saw a mushroom cloud in the distance descend to unbeing and felt his years dissolve chrysalislike.

Then he felt the cool of the metal in his hand.

The pistol he had used in his life before.

The mirror was there now but it had been there before, gathering each recalled scene with further force and power the farther back he went.

He was looking at himself. Of course, he knew what he looked like. But now the image twisted. He gazed at himself and counted his eyes and the count was wrong. Looking at his hands they too were wrong, felt like rough bark or serpent scales or smooth or soft like a slug's skin and his mouth . . . he reached and felt thorns piercing his fingertips.

He was seeing all of them. He was seeing each one in the city under his own form, folded into his very being.

Arrests came then. Old Rob when he had spent too much time obliterating the day, scent of whiskey on his breath, or Paul

when he bloodied his fists on another man's face. Sarah and the rat poison, after listening to the pathologist's report on her daughter . . . he remembered it all now.

But it was still somehow empty, like a ghost watching the living.

Norton came then, stepping through his days.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

Steven nodded and slowly released the symbol in his hand. The machinery uncoiled from his mind and he opened his eyes to the city again.

Two sets of himself existed now. There was the Steven who had reached his universe's end, who had awoken on a stone dais, who had walked the streets of creatures like himself, and then there was the Steven of before, officer and father and husband who would never know the last days of his universe since to him those last days never came.

"Yes," Steven said simply. And that was that.

The machine curved in his hand slightly and he felt it bite into his skin. Thus ended the test. Then the spiral embedded itself into his palm. It could not be removed until the day he died.

All he knew before he knew now. The laws of his former life corresponded to the city or rather subtly those laws were now superimposed upon the life he had before.

He could not know where exactly the boundary lay but it didn't matter. The spiral whined softly in the back of his mind. He heard it and knew what it meant. Steven was being summoned.

There was a crime, it said to him.

6 It's hard to imagine a place built like this perhaps.

It's hard to imagine a country composed of one being divided and divided and alien and familiar where jobs were not assigned but chosen, where one could simply request to be a leader, follower, officer, soldier or king and it would be granted

them.

But the entirety of the city depended upon one thing. It depended upon the trust of its inhabitants, that they were who they seemed to be.

Not every place was designed thus. In another habitation beside a mountain which sloped upward into the sky all the inhabitants were iterations of a murderer.

In a history going back thirty thousand years, in volume after volume, the same story repeated of violence and of blood.

Imagine going back forever and embedded in pages of crystal books a dissertation on murder, as if it alone occupied the thoughts of each inhabitant.

In each home one would find a book written in the blood of one's enemies, one's lovers, one's children, the sacred token of their lives to this distilled. Imagine a life rendered nothing more than information and the information preserved in the ochre and the cyan and the azure of one's blood.

In each home, crystal books would be written thus.

As such one did not choose to be king, soldier, officer, follower or leader. One merely pretended to be such things while the real purpose of their living unfolded neath the skin.

One could expect each to *appear* as normal and civilized and all the time concealing knives behind their backs, poison dripping from poison rings as accidents accrued against the unwary. In such a city of first murderers, all existence was reduced to the mask, the dagger and the sword.

So, one did not choose their profession. They choose their victims and the tasks were merely the means of reaching them.

The circle of move and countermove would continue, each stalking and each being preyed upon and all for one simple reason. The lone occupant who dwelled there had been a murderer before. What difference if the victim was himself?

In other countries other vices dominated.

One could find cities of adulterers condemned to find comfort only in themselves. It was never clear which was more disturbing, the implied self-incest or the fact that there was no one else remotely like oneself so one's lovers would have been scorpions and spiders and velvet worms or things of fewer limbs from obscure places like the Earth.

Here lingered a special form of violence, a passionate desire to see a lover end. And even as the body was carried away the murderer would say as their lover perished their love would never end.

One could find streets of gluttony or sloth or despair or vices or emotions which have no human word attached to them. And in between lay the places of the Europans and the Venusians and the Martians.

And so it was that all souls, from the violet seas to the violent cities were carried along by the wave of the individual actions of individual beings divided and divided forever, each owing its existence to the inherent logic of the previous life.

As such Steven Norton began his job patrolling his new home for but a simple reason.

Being Steven Norton the job belonged to him.

After all, if you can't trust yourself who can you trust?

7 For the first ten days he investigated various small crimes.

He was accepted in the ranks of those others chosen by themselves to aid the grave which was their home.

Norton had returned to the domed hive, to new arrivals who looked human.

In time these others Steven would meet as well. This Norton said. They would not completely look like him but they would appear similar enough. Standing amid beings whose evolutions had run on entirely different tracks Steven appreciated the sentiment and then turned to the streets to continue his task.

Steven began his beat ten days ago and with little challenge, another was assigned to him.

Hiruko.

It was not her name of course. But when he saw her, he was reminded of a Japanese creation myth. His first thought in seeing her, was of the leech-child.

So, in his thoughts, he called her Hiruko.

Over the last ten days, travelling the gold-burnished streets, dealing with beings as familiar and now as alien as his own right hand he often mentioned the myths and legends of the old Earth.

And Hiruko in time mentioned her own.

"In the time before," she said, "in the deep waters there was no place for predators. There were no teeth to bite nor scales nor spines." In seeing her Steven understood the appeal of that supposed golden time. "But eventually a child was born with teeth to bite and claws to catch. The origin of all monsters."

As she spoke and made their rounds, they broke up a few small fights. It was strangely incongruous, discussions of home and myth interwoven between the almost mundane. Then he realized as days passed that stories told had been told before.

As they made their rounds, he'd catch snatches of conversations and so often they would each begin again at the beginning of each one's universe.

It was a litany.

And he had begun by imagining her as a thing of myth.

"This child, this monster," he said, "had teeth and bones jutting beneath the skin?"

"Oh yes," she said, "oh yes."

"And upon its head were thin strands waving in the waves. Though I imagine it couldn't breathe as others breathed and had to assail the land?"

"How did you know?" she asked as they turned a corner

and stood before a small crowd of myths and legends who each resembled in some small way the lost hidden angles of nightmares for those who came before.

"What was it called?" he asked, without saying how he knew.

"It was called Xadheru."

"Then I am Xadheru, I guess," he said. Then the two went on their rounds again.

8 It was the eleventh day.

Steven lay in bed staring at the ceiling, not thinking.

He had been assigned two rooms to live in along the city's outer edge. This room curved at an odd angle. It was imperceptible at first but the longer he'd lived here the more noticeable it was. The room spiralled slightly as if he were standing neath some massive coiling shell.

Steven lay staring at the ceiling, not thinking.

The day before he and Hiruko had almost taken two people in for fighting. They had been arguing over the possession of a portrait of a woman. In his mind's eye, it looked exactly like his wife but it had two mouths and fewer eyes.

Hiruko and he approached the pair as they struck each other and Steven held up his hands. The pair stopped, noticing the spiral pattern in his palm.

Hiruko did likewise though it was harder without bones.

And then for fifty minutes he talked with one, she with another, and they resolved things quietly.

It was just like that time Old Rob and his son got fighting over that statue his wife made. She had been gone only a few weeks and added to the memories and pain and heartache the only thing concrete and real was what she'd made.

That statue of herself.

So, he had taken the time to settle the two men down and

asked if this was what their wife, their mother, really wanted. Here the task was the same, same methods, the same result.

They'd share her and later he'd get a sculptor to make a copy so fine, so detailed, so perfect it would be as if two of them had been made by the same hand. And then he would take both and put them in his office side by side and let the two men come in and take them both.

By the flipping of a coin.

If the right and proper statue went to the father then he'd be happy but even if it was the copy how would he know? The son, how would he know? If a thing were the same in shape, in colour, in memory how would you know the difference between one thing and between the other?

And this was done, leaving both men satisfied, taking the sculpture home and the pair of them never knowing if they had the real thing or not. But by now it didn't matter. Merely the thought of her was enough to sustain them both.

No arrests were made.

Hiruko recorded both men's addresses, mentioning casually that she'd send someone later if they needed to talk, but that was it.

After that a small report at the office, Hiruko etching her fingertips along grey-violet woven sheets texture of ceramic but thinness of a fingernail while Steven typed at a typewriter he'd once used when young. Apparently, another Steven had built this.

As for what became of him, after an infinite lifetime that Steven could be anyone by now.

After the report, he rose and stretched and went to the window. Their office was on the third floor overlooking a small garden of black bones which belonged to the various iterations who had come before.

When one died their bodies remained but who they were, what they were reincarnated, usually leaving these husks behind.

Amid the gardens various people gathered arranging the dead into new geometric shapes, sometimes hexagons, creating what seemed like stony trees striding beside the scarlet foliage of the living.

He turned and stared at the others working. There was the three-armed veteran of a war he never knew, and a creature, (no other word for it,) who was a parasite. It was a jade-grey sphere mired of green tendrils and they were embedded in what had been a headless two-fingered, grey body.

This was the lone survivor of a Counter-Earth.

Of course, he was no different, if simply inversed.

In his veins lay creatures, each smaller than a grain of thought. Bacteria dwelled along his skin, being a part of him and separate from him.

The parasite was much the same, a part and separate from the remainder of its form. Steven crossed the floor and returned to his seat as it slowly sighed under his weight and he simply sat, fingers pushed together in front of his face, eyes slowly focused upon them.

"Problem?" Hiruko asked.

"No. No, just thinking." Steven rose then from his desk, felt the soft grey obsidian conform to his touch, crossed to where Hiruko was and stared at her a moment. Boneless face sunken in slightly and urine-yellow eyes. But in his mind's eye, it was his own face greeting him. And the parasite was also him and the three-armed veteran whose name he couldn't pronounce.

Outside his own serpent's skin was being adorned upon a garden of blackened bones arranged in the same insect pattern he had seen before.

"I need a little while to think," Steven said and got four steps. Then collapsed and fell.

He was taken first to hospital and then home to bed, where he was now, staring at the ceiling. Not thinking.

Hiruko was in the other room, seated in his chair, writing.

She wore a small grey coat, and in a pocket, she had drawn out for the fifth time the letter, glanced at it, feeling the warmth of it, then put it away again.

It was Norton's handwriting.

He had predicted, as he had before, this coming sickness of the soul.

The letter would be given to Steven when he awoke.

For now, he had reached the point they all had reached.

The point of chrysalis.

Hiruko sat in the soft chair and gazed out the window as some winged women passed by. She rose, crossed the golden floor and strode the balcony, watching them pass out of sight.

Each of them was poisonous to the touch, those birdlike women with their taloned feet. Each had come from a world almost adjacent to each other, three grey-feathered women embracing sky for there was nothing left upon the ground to be solaced by. She turned from the winged women back to the empty room and the one chair curving specifically for her comfort and beside it the machine which held all the songs and stories of his memories.

Each had this of course. A further gift of their benefactors.

But it was private, a thin black skin of metal embedded in the wall incapable of being activated save by the true occupant of the room only.

Except for these small, short moments in time.

Hiruko slid her hand along the skin and was drowned of recollections.

She could see her lover but see him through two views of two separate pairs of eyes. They were walking at dusk on a street and there was the smell of autumn leaves but both the word autumn and the word leaf was foreign to her.

And from out a window came a song.

Without realizing it she began to sing a song of the old Earth using an alien tone.

Each being went through this of course.

When it had been her turn and the weight of it all had pressed too deeply, when whatever emptiness had been finally filled by the return of living, she had curled into a ball and placed in a pool of brackish water as the one assigned her stood exactly where she stood now and began not to sing but to recite the old epic, the root myth of her world embedded and buried deeper than even her blood. And he never stopped, never ceasing till she returned to the land of the living.

Now it was her turn to go and do likewise.

She started singing to bring him back to life.

In the other room, eyes unblinking, a thought crept along the borderlands of his mind. It was not his wife. It was not his daughters. Nor was it even the song of the old Earth.

It was when his cat died and he watched white fur replaced with maggot flesh, there in that grassy field after having wondered where she went. But that had been days before.

And suddenly he realized his cat was dead and even her bones were gone.

The maggots, the fields, the tall grass staring at him, the old home and the new, all gone. And the emptiness which had been filled by the new life hollowed out again, poured along the ground or made mad splendour among their gardens of bones, and he was here.

It was as if suddenly he knew he was dead.

It was the same logic that hit each of them in turn. After a few days and a return to the innocence of the old life there always came the same logic that perhaps their old home was still there and they were gone, that this was not Mars but hell, that they alone had perished in fire and flood and being dead deserved a

coffin only.

Sometimes it hit them making love, imagining two skeletons entwined in each other's arms. Sometimes it hit them eating, wondering how the dead could need food or even need hunger. Sometimes it just hit apropos of nothing except a single glance at a garden of bones or another report typed up or knowing he was standing in a hall of mirrors staring at himself.

The song kept coming up through the walls, warm and soft and mild, a breeze of summer embedded in an autumn day.

And the cat was buried behind the house and his parents were there and he took a step toward them and as he did his hand embedded with the spiral reached up out toward them and he almost felt the soft warmth of their bodies and their smiles as his eyes focused and the images faded and he recalled the office and the report and the two men fighting over the image of their wife and the song grew louder and more defined and he drew himself up, sitting up and moving toward it . . .

As he at last opened the doors and saw her standing beside his memories.

"Ah, you're awake," she said.

"What happened?"

"This is for you." She handed the letter to him but continued singing. "You should read it after your shower."

"I fell asleep," he said. "I was in the office and I fell asleep. How long was I out?"

And she told him.

Twenty-five days.

9 There were other things to learn about being here.

There were rituals to recall and understand.

They didn't get sick anymore. No diseases of the old world were left and even if one were ill plagues and pathogens couldn't pass from person to person anyway and if one died of a disease

what would it matter? They'd simply come back again while the illness itself would perish in the womb of their old body.

That said there were rituals in place for times like this when other losses accrued.

Steven read the letter and read it again.

Norton had explained that what he went through was a part of the new life, part of the new ordeal of being. The letter had to be given after the first brush of this, never before. If such a thing were given before one would try to prepare for its arrival, try to brace oneself for the shock and horror and that would cause far more damage than letting it flow naturally.

It would be, and here was the analogy Norton used, the same as a man unconsciously falling to the ground. Usually, if he survived his survival depended on not tensing himself for the impact but his limbs being loosely left, oblivious to all else.

So too here.

After the letter had been read and he showered, his body drenched in water the colour of wine, the pair left his rooms and went back to the office. But first, they took a stroll through the garden of bones for a time. This too was part of the new ritual of his life. Each person in the old places knew of graves and burial or the funeral pyre but to know intimately you would one day be walking through your own cemetery, that one day you'd be placing your own bones here . . .

This inhuman logic could stop anyone cold.

They spent long hours here, he touching the bones, she behind him, subtly whistling a song from the old Earth, and then finally they returned to the office.

As if nothing had happened.

Steven returned to his desk familiar as his skin and began to type again. The report was still there as if no time had passed at all. Hiroku was again across from him, herself acting as if the days had not passed in singing to return him to the living lands.

And Steven stared once more at the form of the parasite seated on the other side of the room. Sightless eyes turned to him and Steven acknowledged him, nodding his head ever so subtly as the parasite did likewise.

And then they all continued their work again.

10 At night Steven walked the streets listening to the sounds of people milling about. After every hour his mind returned, ever so slightly, back to the universe from which he came.

This too was part of the new life.

He walked now in three distinct worlds, never deviating.

In the city Steven Norton was but one small part of the great machine, a single cell in an organism comprising each building and each wall and even his own clothing. He was no longer an individual. He was legion.

But then ever so slightly he'd return, his mind free to stride backward through the seasons of before when he was not the last man but just a man, when he was not the last witness to creation but just a father sleeping beside his wife listening to her breathing in the night, before drifting to sleep himself.

And then there was the other world.

Beyond the city, his mind drifted too. He tried to imagine what lay beyond. He could simply travel there. The roads were open and due to the nature of the spider-roads time dilated. What would take days or even months normally could be achieved in hours as if the paths collapsed together, linking all things to a single dark design.

And in his mind's eye, he'd glance out upon the scarlet wine dust seas, far removed from any city, and see them. They were thin threads crossing the blackness, each thread illuminated and brilliant. The threads were extensions of the road, linking all together. If he had wished he could have walked from Mars to Charon, time moving in concert with his needs.

But he had never seen the roads before. The roads into the night.

And no one ever explained if such things even were, or if he simply imagined them to be . . .

But in his mind's eye the world beyond took on a slightly different design.

He imagined the city of his wife. He imagined the Europans and the Venusians and even the Martians. He thought sometimes the Europans were blue-tinted people with bone wings who sailed the air, who recited their thoughts along the wind needing no other means of preserving themselves.

The Venusians? Serpents given bodies perhaps or parasites dwelling forever in the trapped amber of crystalline forms. And the Martians in their wine-blue seas with centipedes below them, blue and transparent circling forever and forever, living and dying and living again, inland seas beside cities of salt.

In this other country, he also lived.

He could leave but sometimes, struggling in his sleep he imagined that if he ventured beyond then this other realm would dissolve away, all his dreams obliterated by reality.

Unless . . .

So, in the morning, each morning, he began to write . . .

He penned each story carefully, taking the little he knew and adding to it. He gave names to the Martians, never knowing if the names were real or not.

Knowing that one could arrive and not be themselves he imagined himself and Hiroku leading one of these lost souls away, striding out beyond the city to other borderlands.

He built a menagerie of the unseen, of men with black gaping holes where eyes would be who somehow could still see. He wrote of tiger women and sightless women and lion-faced men, of great palanquins dragged forth by machines whose shapes shifted from panther to horse to demon carrying their own

gods inside great artificial pools, each god gazing upon their dominion with a single, solid blue eye.

He wrote and continued to write even as seasons passed and slowly his old life became the broad foundation of a dream . . .

11 "But one city had no roads linking it to the rest of Mars. Beside an ocean of dulled black water buried behind walls within walls lay the Infinite City. In the distance cold mountains could be seen but gazing again at the same spot suddenly the mountains were gone, replaced by a lake or replaced by an image of yet another city, identical to itself.

"Everything beyond the walls twisted while everything within the walls remained the same, including the man crossing the streets. If one could see not one universe nor two nor twelve but all of this, they would see this man acting the exact same way, making the same moves in each iteration of the Infinite City.

"Even as all else changed he remained the same as did the walls and buildings, immutable and still.

"This was his perfect inescapable prison. But today, in moving toward the wall, going toward the stone he feels the subtle weakness. Yes. Here. Yes, here. He puts his hand to the wall and feels it give, ever so slightly.

"The Infinite City is succumbing to him.

"It is only a matter of time.

"And as an immortal, he has all the time in the worlds . . ."

Finishing here he looks to Hiroku to see her smiling. By now one thousand days have passed. By now the city once so strange has bled into bland familiarity and the fiction has become the second skin of his mind.

She nods, enjoying his story; yet another one he's told. Over the seasons his tales have slowly bled into everything like a wire in the blood.

Sitting before the garden of bones he gazes up overhead noticing the women flying by. Across the way two are playing chess or something he mistakes for chess. It hardly matters now.

Hiroku and he then go back to work and the smooth regularity of the same day. And when night comes, he will finish this. This story will be finished and he will move on to the next.

But, every once in a while, the pain still comes to him and the face of his wife greets him out of the corner of his eye.

And later, how much later he cannot say, when he has lived this life to its end his feet will turn along the road passing between the scarlet wine dust sea and he will step beyond the threshold of the cities, one after another forever, always returning to this place and its people, and sometimes, yes perhaps sometimes the fiction will play out like in his dreams.

And one day he may even stand where his wife exists, where each iteration of her is there and he will say he was Steven Norton and she will say her name. Each of her forty million names.

Perhaps he will go back to Hiroku then and become a thing of myth again, or die in his wife's company one more final time.

"Have you decided how the story ends?" Hiroku asks.

"Yeah. The prisoner was taken away because he would offer anyone the chance to produce one perfect thing, a book, a painting, a sculpture, and the price of this would be that one's family would never exist. One's children would be unborn. It would be the death of them, those people condemned to choose between."

"Who imprisoned him?"

"Who else? His victims, who created a perfect thing of their own. They put him in a cage forever. What he doesn't realize until the story's end is once the walls break down and he's free he's free to change, to age. To die."

“Is that a good ending, or a bad one?” she asks.

“I don’t know. Maybe the story doesn’t end.”

Steven turns back to his typewriter and writes the next report, and the next, while Hiroku sits across from him, singing slowly, softly, slowly the songs of the old Earth.

THE KING OF ELSEWHERE

Prologue
Released to Elsewhere

There was death afoot in the darkness. There was the soft still pattering of feet, invisible small blackened sounds and one might imagine them to be the sounds of a cat crawling her way home.

There was crisp thundering then along the grass and high into the sky as if the small pattering were going in reverse, as if gravity had suspended all her rules and now something was being pulled upward, outward into the naked stars.

Belonging to the world below one could see the ravaged heart-shorn bodies along the grass, blistering into black scorn. It was like a latticework of flesh melting in the rain, grey lips burning into smouldering heaps of themselves, small piles of hands lustfully grasping one another with nothing else besides them but the hands.

This she was looking at as she was pulled upward against the naked stars.

Out into the black cloth of untouched frozen moments, she was suspended then, seeing the others, glittering glistening maggotlike, waiting to be born along the edge of her perception, carried off toward exodus while her own body was blistering blackly in the nighted vale of tears below.

And she wished, desperately, to go with them, to carry upward limbs she no longer had and move among them. But some solar-bright current caught her, blinded her, and in a moment as she imagined time she was drifting backward, not to the world below, not to the army beyond but toward some unglimpsed portion of the sky.

And without throat or voice or lips she started to scream.

It carried her off then and she passed a galaxy in a second as she now imagined time, for flesh-less, rudderless a second seemed a day or a billion years. Something came to her perception, some blue smear scattered with white and grey. A planet. She was staring at a planet and far beyond it she saw another larger world and a great red eye leering lustfully at her.

And she screamed as she was carried brokenly down below, screaming her last defiance at the world's end.

But it was not the end of things for her.

And it was not the end.

Continents swept to view. She saw great herds cross fields of tall tanned grass, creatures of horns and fangs and mottled skin and realized these were different animals, some of blunt teeth or sharp, some moving in great numbers and others following, and she glimpsed a small creature of the horn devoured by a pack of smaller things, mottled of skin and long canine teeth.

The wind caught her and suddenly she was in the midst of war.

Saw soldiers of dark skin, not luminous like her people but dull; saw men brokenly lying in cities. Yes. Yes, these were cities but they did not breathe. They were still.

She touched briefly the body of a man . . . yes, yes this was flesh but he seemed wrong somehow. Dark-skinned, limbs misshapen, and he had so few eyes.

He was lying beside a wall of tanned brick so like the grass below in that other corner of the world and he was screaming crimson to the ground; she brushed his face and he looked up, directly into her.

Is this what my people will become? she asked as life slipped his veins. Another voice answered her but she did not hear. Then the wind picked up and she was gone again.

She crossed the world and crossed it twice, stared into

ruined settlements drifting lengthwise, then through museums and bones of things she could not understand. She smelled the sex of lovers and did not know what she was seeing but felt revolted at having seen.

She melted through glass and grass and canvases of painters and each time reached with unfeeling invisible fingers to devour their souls, yet never did. No not once did she ever find one to haunt or inhabit or possess.

Until she found me.

Part I.

Chapter One

Cities are alike. One finds in looking at them only a certain mind can imagine it and only a certain mind conceives it. It is not so much a collection of buildings or structures as an organism.

It needs to breathe, after all, to grow. One does not idly place it in a gorge half a foot wide and say here is where we will begin and go no farther than this. One does not put it amidst a river or fire, or the middle of the ocean or on the dark side of the sun.

And when one places it where one wishes then one must consider what is needed of it. Sewers to dispose of the cast-off detritus of its individual cells. Arteries to flow to and from the heart to each of its waiting limbs. Bones and teeth. Better to make the shape of it.

And so wherever one stands, if they stand in a city, one feels the overwhelming dimensions of the mind bearing down upon the stone. One feels the fossilized remnant of those who came before. And since all were human before, regardless of whether it is stone or steel all cities feel the same.

But it doesn't mean one doesn't miss their homes.

Liam Gagnon and Dylan Frimaire had sat in the web of Xignthaia for sixteen days now. It was like all cities in some ways, tall hives of buildings waiting to be born, for the eyes of windows to be opened, the closing of doors to make dimensions of lives.

But all things happen one step at a time.

There were the roads and the cars like small beetles crawling-slicked along smooth veins, amid bicycles spinning by, always about to be hit but somehow mothlike avoiding the rupture of metal and glass and flesh, and bone. There were blinking lights high lanternlike overhead at those rough intervals

where arteries met.

And the vendors and their oranges, scarlets, and slivers of meat, themselves at regular intervals, unique and interchangeable. And into this Liam and Dylan walked.

They were on vacation.

The goal was to pass a few days in idleness and then head south and while they waited Dylan spent his time penning a new collection of sonnets while Liam scoured streets, listening to sounds of people, places, and things all bending to collection cacophony of themselves. While Dylan was a poet Liam hadn't yet penned anything of note.

Back in his homeland, he wanted to write but pages seemed blank canvas, white deserts nameless as a tomb. So, he left to find a wider way of things, a way to broaden, to deepen his mind.

As for Dylan?

Give him five minutes in the blandest room in the world and he'd create a poem about a demon who stepped into it, searching for a man, finding the man had left and left to its own loneliness the poor demon went insane.

Thus the contrast between the men.

Now they were in a far country travelling old roads, breathing in centuries like a scent of grass and all the lonely hours stretched on inside Liam's head, waiting for inspiration's strike.

Then it struck him upside the head.

She had fallen phoenixlike in the night and there he was, pale echo of flesh walking along a road wearing clothes white as a moon and she was reminded of home, staring at that shade of white in the sky, and before she knew it, she'd passed clean through . . . and they felt the hard cement rush up to meet their hand.

My hand.

No. My hand.

Liam glanced up and thought perhaps he saw something in the night which stared at him a moment, mirrorlike, then was gone. It seemed spiderlike somehow. There was a vague scattering of limbs and eight black eyes, and he realized he was looking at it in the past tense. It was not happening. It had happened.

He/they staggered up. Everything felt wrong, legs bent wrong. Wrong angle. They? No. Her. Turning about along the edge of the road he waved at a man sliding by on a bicycle, masked. Ah. The air, they decided. *He* decided.

The air stank of something poisonous. He wrapped his mouth in his mask and turned lazy, drunken-seeming feet to home.

When he arrived Dylan glanced up to see a dishevelled man squander into the room . . . squander? Why had Dylan imagined such a word?

"Liam?" Dylan asked. Liam stared down at him. The room was a small room comprising a couch, a few chairs, and two beds. The hotel was fine enough that walls and windows seemed clean but one could never tell what lay beneath the surface. All manner of corruption probably lay within. Like dust mites perhaps. Or spiders.

The room was a small room?

Liam went to the nearby almost-ornate wooden chair and realized he had heard . . . something.

"The room was a small room?" he asked aloud.

"Huh?" The poet glanced up. Liam reached for a lamp on a nearby table and turned it on. In the half-diffused light, Dylan could see his old friend clearly. He seemed a touch pale, brown hair dulled, and yet . . . shimmering? His jaw was set, his watery blue eyes glazed, his thinned spider-fine hands trembling.

Spider-fine?

Quickly Dylan reached for pen, and paper and started writing.

"How does this sound? 'Spider-fine hands of the man squandering into the room, glistening pale as the moon.' What do you think?"

At that moment poor Liam howled.

His lips opened, throat cleared and he let out a howl like some spider might make if a spider were given a throat and lips and lungs capable of taking in a breath. Dylan glanced up at his friend, paused, turned back to the paper, wrote some more, and then said, "So, not drunk then?"

"What did you say?" Liam asked. He hadn't realized he had howled yet. Then comprehension hit him as if he were living a few seconds behind, as if actions as they happened slowed, smeared along time and he was only now catching up to the afterglow of them.

"Why did I do that?" he asked.

Why did I do that? she asked.

Dylan rose. He was a small, thin man, the hauteur of a hawklike nose chiselling ahead of him, black-bead eyes staring at his friend, stooped, thin shoulders, and thin fine hands. He crossed from the couch and looked directly into his friend's face.

"Bad night?"

"No, it was . . . fine. I was walking. I thought I saw . . . something though."

"A touch of the wendigo I think," the poet said. He put his hand on Liam's right wrist and checked his pulse. "No smell of drink on you. Don't look sick. Hand though is a bit rough. Fell?"

"Yes, yes I fell."

"Road rose up to catch your feet?"

"I saw . . .," he paused suddenly then, glanced to the lamp, back to Dylan, then the ceiling, "maybe it was a spider. Bigger. Yeah. Bigger."

"Bigger than what? A fly, a dog, my ego?"

"Not as big as your ego, but big enough."

Dylan took his friend by the hand and led him to the bed farthest from the door.

"Get a little sleep, my boy."

"And you?"

"Liam, my friend. It's the curse of a poet. Think we ever sleep with all the voices in our head?"

Liam smiled and lay down on the white sheets. Suddenly he felt terrified and tired and realized suddenly he had never slept before. Suddenly twice? He realized that the words he heard were spoken to him and through him. A narrator was speaking and he was listening, privately etched along the surface of the action itself.

It was as if a director were speaking over a play and the actors heard the director's words and realized how bad they were.

Then the narration in his head ceased as sleep found her way.

And she realized as sleep took hold of her, she'd never slept before. In all the days and nights, she'd never slept. The intrinsic position of herself inside him had opened up the small doorway *It* used, *Its* seeing of things, *Its* view. In the void, before she fell, she'd heard *It* whispering the old blood, life's blood of the universe, *Its* secretive talk with *Itself*. And this was being passed clean through to him.

But second, by second, that omni-mind was being dissolved in his flesh. He had heard the words *It* used, *Its* peering into things, herself the conduit, but now sleep was taking hold and the conduit was closing off *Its* purpose.

By morning his thoughts would no longer turn into the potential of the observer but become again the observed.

She dreamed of the old hills, her people running nakedly across the grass and suddenly he too was there running with her

and she saw he took on the aspect of her kind, the jewel-eyed wonder of her perfect people while he saw her as a naked woman with red hair, and her pale skin seemed soft, smooth, and warm. And her lips too.

And all the time Dylan sat at the desk working upon a sonnet, making sure to glance back to his friend as he twisted in his sleep, and every now and then, just in case, he had the phone ready in case an ambulance was needed to take his friend to hospital. And him with him.

Chapter Two

When dawn hit the window, she realized she hadn't noticed it. Then she did. There was the sun in her mind and then this alien sun which hadn't existed before to her, yet now was.

"Sleep well?" Dylan asked.

Liam turned over and saw Dylan still at his desk, writing. His black clothes seemed the same rumpled mess as last night. He hadn't changed. Suddenly Liam remembered he had seen something through another's eyes . . . no, something alien had seen through his eyes.

"I don't know," Liam said and swung his/their legs over the side of the bed.

"Do you know who Ira Amraire is?" Dylan asked. It was such an innocuous question that Liam didn't feel the need to answer, so when lips moved of their accord and he, now being in sync, realized at the moment *he* hadn't moved them, the shock of the answer followed.

"It's my name," the voice, almost his own, said.

"I thought so. Well, what do they say? Ah, yes. Possession is good for the soul."

Ira Amraire turned this thought over in her mind. Liam, now realizing, since he and she were in sync, that he was not alone, began to panic. Dylan swift as a jaguar rose and made certain he stayed seated. Easier to fall backward on a bed than on the floor.

"I didn't say that, I . . . I didn't say that."

"I know. Voice is different. Octave higher. Not your voice at all."

"How did you know my name?"

"I didn't say that."

"How did you know my name?"

"My dear . . . Ira, is it? I knew for one simple reason."

"Which is?"

"My dear you talk in your sleep."

And then he explained. He had made copious notes and also recorded the night's conversation. Liam Gagnon had spent eight hours talking drunkenly, deliriously to himself, except the one answering back was nothing like him.

Knowing the man as Dylan did it seemed incredulous that someone with such a lack of imagination would conceive of half the things he did. Alien worlds, three moons hanging in an alien sky above spider-ribboned cities. And then the one who led them halfway across the canopy of stars.

No. Liam could not have imagined this and being creative enough Dylan came to only a few possibilities. Drugs? Possible but Liam on LSD was barely more interesting than Liam usually. Psychosis? Liam was the only man in history to be a boring psychotic. Possession by an alien parasite? Sounds about right.

So, Dylan waited to tell them what he knew when they woke up. Of course, since Ira had been asleep too, she only knew half of what she knew, for in the dream state she devolved to the drunken logic of something alien to her kind.

The three had eggs, toast and coffee, Dylan introducing the idea of food being provided without first being caught, then they settled to meditate on what had seemed impossible, to two of them anyway. Dylan took the entire exercise in stride.

At first, they used words. Ira spoke about her native world and Liam spoke about his own. It had been an oddly crude discourse, each trying to bridge the gap of the other.

Dylan after about an hour of talking to an alien from beyond the farthest star, experiencing the most significant milestone in human history got bored and went out for donuts. He asked if Liam wanted any.

Liam said no.

Left to their own devices no longer needing words two

minds began to merge together, as they had in dreams.

Her world Yuyutsula came to her. Slow rolling hills emerged from the edges of her memories and her people in their nests high atop small isles of forests of crystal.

And high overhead the world's chief moon came into view. Yet gazing out among forests and fields and slow rolling hills a stone building emerged and then it grew, a little kingdom of stone in a glass land. Then the forests took back their own.

The building and trees became one, occupying the same space and ground as nests mingled into small rooms.

So, this is your world? he asked.

So, this is your world? she asked.

Both cases were only partially true. As memories bled together both worlds came into clear focus, distorting everything.

Suddenly Liam stopped. He took and drew up the city and moved it to one small portion of her world. The trees were left to their own devices and the people in his city suddenly were not children of this alien soil.

There. This is my world.

Then the pair of them took a stroll inside.

Chapter Three

Dylan crossed the street and then went into a bookstore. He passed books whose languages he could not understand.

Finally, he came across the book he sought.

The Malachite Cat and Other Poems.

He strummed his fingers along the tanned binding and then drew the book out and glanced at it briefly. His book. He hadn't known for certain it would be here. Twice now he'd crossed a continent and briefly, without knowing why, there it was.

His book.

He'd scattered them as seed a decade before and now here they were like dandelion brushes drifting on the wind.

His book.

Within were sparrow clock towers racing upward to the sun. Within was a hand, held in a glass doom. Within was a world without night for in that universe there had never been a beginning and so the stars outnumbered themselves and a brief luminescence half-diffused itself across the infinite waters of the suns.

Within was a small town which had survived a nuclear war where a few clustered together, themselves now the entire world, a few fields, roads and buildings the total of forever and everything.

He put the book back, drew it out again and purchased it for a sum easily its worth.

"I wonder how those strangers are?" he asked briefly of himself. The bookstore owner looked up, smiling, not understanding and Dylan bowed, and said something in the native tongue about longing and loneliness and trying to outrun the sun and the bookstore owner said he didn't understand.

And Dylan said that was the story of his life, then went out

again into the waiting warmth of the sun.

He could have returned to the hotel and watched the pair debate with themselves. He could have gone to the first authority he could find and mentioned, half-casually, oh yeah, we'd found alien life.

But doing such a thing would have led nowhere at all.

Part of being a poet always involved living half a life. One dwelled in the world of the living and the concrete and the real and one dwelled in the world of their own thoughts and suspended along the thin thread of both realities such people lived.

As such, one recalled the countries which never were and made them real upon the canvas of description. And because such mythologies were now rendered real, they in turn affected the concrete reality about them. Thrown like a small pebble into a pond each act of fiction set ripples, each ripple influencing the still perfection of what was, thereby creating new ripples from new mythologies.

This dichotomy meant half of what existed at the moment, from the glass-wire chair he sat upon to the music drifting across the air of the voices of dead men whose words were suspended in machines, could have been a mythic thing but a time before.

So, being that he had spent his time penning absurdities, alien tales of wondrous places Dylan suspected he'd hardly be believed if he ever said anything he wrote was real. As for Liam?

Oh, poor Liam.

"Show don't tell," he said to himself.

"Pardon me?" a voice queried.

He looked up.

He'd been walking and now was in a small restaurant. He idly realized he'd had chopsticks in his hands and had been nibbling at some rice. He'd almost forgotten how he came here.

The woman was from the city but spoke his language.

"Sorry. An old literary term. Miss?"

She told him his name. He motioned for her to sit across from him and she did. She was surprisingly young-looking, dark-haired, the dress she wore was also dark, and she was slender and slim. An office worker perhaps. He wasn't sure.

"Have you been here long?" she asked.

"Oh, I've been here forever. You?"

"A few years. I'm thinking of going to your country when I'm older."

"Ah, Jahnada."

"Jahnada?"

"I guess it's close enough to how it really is. So why do you want to go?"

"It's a beautiful country. I've seen pictures of it."

"Yes," he stared out the window at the small poisonous breeze, dung-grey wraiths of smog passing by, "I suppose it is."

"What does show, not tell mean?" she asked.

"Oh, like I said, it's a literary term. It means in a story you don't want to say someone is something. You have to show they are what they claim to be." She looked as if she didn't comprehend.

"Okay, let me explain. Let's say we have a man. The man is in a story. The story is about him . . . let's say it's about him in the middle of the woods. He's alone, terrified. Now, I could either say, 'The man in the woods was terrified,' or I could say 'The man shivered in the woods though it wasn't cold. He raced on, panicking from every sound, crashed bulletlike through every tree, scrambling, his head backward occasionally looking behind him, though none pursued.' Which sounds more like he was terrified, the first description or the second?"

"The second of course," she said.

"Exactly. Now, I have this friend, a nice guy but he's

unable to tell a story. He tries. He came with me for inspiration. I can just say, 'Oh Liam, he's unimaginative,' or, well I can give examples."

"Why does it matter if he's imaginative or not? What sort of man is he anyway?"

Dylan stared back to the bare rectangular continent of the window and noticed a few masked souls walking by.

"He's the sort of man who could be possessed by an alien and his best friend wouldn't worry if he was alright because even that wouldn't be enough to really change him much anyway."

"Well, how do you know for sure?" she asked.

He glanced up at her.

"I think I know my friend."

"But do you know the alien?" she asked.

He considered that. Were he a normal man sitting in a restaurant the whole conversation would have been bizarre, this strange woman sitting across from him talking nonchalantly. Except, of course, she wasn't really here.

Instead, he'd plotted the entire scene, tried to piece together how this woman in his mind would speak, what she'd say, how he'd answer her. It was not a hallucination nor a delusion. It was exercise, the kind of exercise any writer would do waiting in a small restaurant for something to happen.

Oftentimes he'd cross rough continents with travellers he'd imagine, people whose opinions seemed reflections of his own, though so often he was surprised by what they said.

He was surprised now.

As he considered the words everything froze. In his imagination, he stood up even though he was sitting in the real. He crossed to the window, glanced out, turned back, sat again and let the conversation resume.

"I don't really know that much about her except what she told me."

"What exactly did she say?"

"She comes from a far world. Her body is lying somewhere in the grass of that world. She was swept upward into the naked stars to go elsewhere."

"Why?"

"She tried to say but the words caught wickedly in his throat. I doubt it was for a reason we'd count as good."

"Should we go there now?"

"And do what?" He tapped at his book lying on the table in his head. He didn't know why.

"Be there for him perhaps. For them."

"I think by now they're in each other's heads. Got a few details of course. Some small things I've learned. But there's little I can do."

"If she were inside you, what would you do?"

"Oh, well, if the roles were switched, I'd be showing her my garden, I guess. Orchard of worlds, dhartha roses where I lay, that sort of thing."

And what do you think he is showing her? she asked. She was no longer using words now; just thoughts tumbling through his head. He wouldn't show her his dreams, he figured, or his fantasies. He'd show her . . .

"Home," he said finally. "He'd show her home."

And what if she showed him the exact same thing?

"If all she showed him was the same . . . show don't tell."

He stood up then. He had a few questions to ask the young woman nestled in his best friend's mind.

Chapter Four

The world he showed her was his own, buildings crisp brick, streets broad smooth, he ten, sitting on a beach, she beside him there now. And she was ten, red-haired, pale-skinned except when the sun glinted just right and then he'd notice she had dark scales about her eyes like black amber. And when she walked legs bent at unnatural angles. He was ten. Odd this age.

Other children were about, playing, laughing, pretending. William said he was on the moon and Sarah said she would conquer it, take the whole world away from him awhile.

And Liam? He was on the sands and behind him the city but the angle seemed wrong as if it had moved forward now, straddling a place it didn't really belong. But what was he playing?

He wasn't.

Sand. Yes, there was sand here. Ocean there. She beside him. Buildings behind him. But out of these desperate things he made nothing. He could count. He could write. But there was nothing to write about.

His mother came into his thoughts, this ghost, yet out of all the things he wanted to say or could, nothing came to him. Numbly watched her pass, cross the surf, enter waves, and dissolve away.

"Who was that?" the girl in his head asked.

"My mother."

"What's a mother?" she asked.

He tried to explain parents, sex, something he knew later but since he was both ten and thirty, transposed between this beach and later years he only could speak as freely as he could.

"We don't have mothers here," she said. He glanced to the forests of her people, spiderlings descending from branches. Another word caught wickedly to him. Feast, the word was.

They don't have mothers here.

"What did you do before?" he asked her. "Before you came to me?"

He saw canvases of long tapestries embedded and etched along trees. Annals of kings perhaps, worlds condensed to their histories. Each tapestry was pale as her skin, white, luminous and oddly cold. In the half-formed mingling of their minds, he could scan across the waters to the forest to read what she had written.

And what she had written of was cold.

Dates yes. Figures. Each life was differentiated by its name but not its action. Her progenitor had done as she had and hers before her, and hers before her. If time could be measured from an alien calendar, then perhaps a billion years had passed and nothing and no one had changed in a billion years.

The seasons were fixed shallow and unmoving from their rigid positions on a static grid of days and times. Food? Small insects caught and consumed, each neither thinking of fleeing nor fearing of death, each caught but caught only in the sense of her people having to reach out and they pretend to flee.

Everything she was her people were. And a word suddenly he realized she missed until this exodus among the stars.

The word was conflict.

"You were a writer back home," he said.

"I suppose so. Yes. What is conflict?" she asked.

And this he tried to explain while Dylan kept making his way to their adopted home.

Liam was twenty now. Herself twenty.

He had walked into the library brushing his hands against the bindings, some old and worn, others plastic-smooth. Strange thought that. Plastic.

"What is plastic?" she asked.

And he tried to explain what plastic was. It was something artificial made to conform to whatever one desired. It could be moulded and changed. It wasn't bone or wood or alive but one could fashion it into shapes and forms. Image of an animal. Binding of a book. And she started almost to weep then asked what weeping was, and when told couldn't hold back her tears anymore.

He took her to a small table and let her sit and she cried, and he tried to ask why but she couldn't tell him. Not yet. There was something about the idea of sitting in a room full of unliving things which unsettled her, things appearing alive that never were.

He sat for what seemed forever and waited till tears stopped slowly, not knowing what else to do.

There was nothing to say, no word of comfort, just them in a long empty room surrounded by bright rows of books until her pale eyes returned to seeing, her hands no longer shook, and she stood. Then they continued on their way.

Eventually, quite without realizing it, he drew out a copy of Dylan's book. Idly he leafed through it.

"The pyramids aslant, athwart of crimson fire . . . the errant sun . . . seven-fingered cities of the moon . . . a fragrance we'll barely recall before we chance but twice to die."

He mouthed the sentences he knew slowly. She asked him what it meant. Without thinking he handed the book to her. Taking it in hands alien to her kind she leafed the pages herself, mimicking what she saw.

"The other, he wrote this," she said. He nodded.

"Why?"

"I could never understand that you know."

Suddenly they were outside and it was winter and they were dressed in winter clothes. Ravens were talking on telephone wires overhead and he was twenty and he remembered the day,

having spent it looking for a place to go.

She felt hours growing hot and thick and lazily stretching out forever and the day seemed a wasteland unused. So, he just walked as the cold ate sharply into him and she asked what cold was.

He tried to tell her but even though she was in the midst of snow rustling about she couldn't feel the texture of snow. Her breath didn't turn to the soft fog of grey. She existed in the world but wasn't part of it.

He tried to grope for the right words.

"Blisteringly annoyingly cold." Blisteringly? Not quite right. The line he realized came from Dylan's book. Not Liam's thoughts at all. "Cold is something that eats at you," he said, stumbling for the words, "Cold is something that hurts."

"It's like tears," she said.

"I suppose yeah. It's like tears."

The book without realizing passed back into his hands. He started at it and then came to another page.

You pressed our lives to squares and shapes and forms.
We married women we did not love. In time we'd sleep
with worms beneath the ground and soil and sound,
and never would return.

The mad king of elsewhere sits and whittles upon
his throne all terrors we might have known which
pass us as a stone. The world obeys cruelties
of itself. Martyrlike we go and pass

our days, obedient as a star about the dark road
of the night. For in no rebellion can we be saved.

The words trailed behind him like tattering fragments of

flags, some white, some scarlet, all seemed caught in her hands and hair. He turned to see her standing lost a moment in the middle of the street as words caught wickedly inside her then.

She knew them. All of them. It was like a door opened in her mind and suddenly everything became clear as crystal and she said she felt cold.

But she didn't know why.

She asked how many books he'd read and when he said thousands she grew hot inside and began then to read all the books stored in his memories.

She simply couldn't stop even as Dylan came to their room to see Liam lying on the bed, paralyzed, frozen as amber in glass. He checked the man's pulse, opened an eyelid and went to fetch some paper and pen.

He wondered what he'd find.

The Girl in the Labyrinth. That was the first book she found about a girl of stone wandering in a black glass labyrinth till she found her way out and learned her stone skin was but a chrysalis, beneath which she was an ordinary girl.

Then she went on, one volume after another.

The Jovian Chronicles.

The Window Ledge Tribe.

Three Cord Wire.

Martian Falls.

Infinite Speech at the Bank of Communication.

And on it went. She devoured book after book and as she did Liam flitted back toward the world she knew. He walked among cocoon-grey branches of trees listening to the same story recalled again and again.

Here in this branch, she was born and before her another, and before her another. They crawled down to this exact spot at the foot of the tree and he could see it smoothed from untold trillions of treads, feet of a billion souls all acting as one.

The story he heard remained unchanged until the end.

At last, he came upon the piles of bodies and knew not what they meant. For if nothing could change how did this happen?

And as he asked the question, she read the first Detective Oakfish mystery.

A man is murdered in the grass, throat slit, clothes damp but there was no rain last night. In his pocket is a picture of a woman. The Detective investigates.

She has a view of him. Tall, broad-shouldered, hair the colour of snow and beside him Sergeant Monkshroud, thin and short, always with a notepad in hand.

But more than this. For Oakfish existed outside of time.

There was a date attached to the first story. Sept 11, 1964. A date? She pondered the idea of a date, the demarcation of a year slid and sliced from the rest of time. The Detective lived in another country, someplace colder and damper with hills which streaked the sky and brown dales of grass tall as wheat . . . wheat?

She probed his memories for the word.

But the Detective, and his Sergeant, together they drove in a car, went to visit the young woman, to explain the crime, who and how and why.

The story itself was deceptively simple. The murdered man had been killed by the husband of the woman he was having an affair with. The reason his clothes were damp was because the murderer had stored him in a freezer for the night and then tossed him like garbage to the fields.

And the picture?

Left on purpose to lead all roads back to the murderer so he could explain himself as to why. He explained quite simply everything as he was being taken away to prison.

Prison?

She glanced at the word carefully, and went walking in his memories, but still had no clear view of it, just what he had read.

It was a place to send those who committed crimes.

It was a terrible place where people who did terrible things were sent, for a time, to protect society from them. And then they were freed again. The idea struck a discordant cord in her mind.

Freed again?

All that work, the story compiled to find one guilty of a crime and then at some point the murderer might be freed. How could they ever free a murderer?

Of course, it was rare. It seldom happened. But it happened.

She turned the story over and read it again and then moved on to the next, and the next, and the next.

The stories were all the same it seemed.

Someone was murdered and then the investigators came, asking questions, taking names, trying to piece together what happened, why and how, and who would have gained.

Sometimes it was a lover or a hated enemy. Sometimes it was an accident which made the killer become a criminal by concealing what he'd done. Strange thought for one to become a criminal not by action but by concealing a crime.

Of course, if it had been negligence, a faulty thresher in the fields, a haphazard attention to detail then the one responsible was still guilty. But not guilty of murder. Not until he or she admitted in their own mind their guilt by trying to conceal it.

The philosophy was summed up nicely by the Detective. "When a man commits a crime unknowingly, he hides his actions well." The paradox unsettled her slightly. But still, she kept on reading, and all the time Liam wandered among the bodies of her people embedded in her memories, trying to understand the nature of this crime too.

He wandered among broken luminous bodies and in the far distance once or twice imagined pyramids rising in the distance, some unglimpsed future premonition, pyramids athwart of fire, crimson as a dusk-riddled sun.

He bent to a body and noticed she had been impaled upon the darting fangs of her sister. He moved to the next, the next, and the next and each time the pattern held, one body linked to another, to another, venom dripping deeply into their souls.

And glancing up imagined them rising ephemeral as wraiths into the sun-riddled sky.

From their perspective, there was never a day or a night beyond the one. It was as if a day had been copied and scattered like seed so that each day was one day, one unbroken chain.

And then to suddenly be tossed upward into chaos, to see the light from a new angle, rising again and again, one bright

sphere copied fifty trillion times, each moment's ascent driving new perceptions into them until it was not a sun but a lattice of suns, not a sky but a latticework of skies.

And why? Why had they done this terrible thing?

He walked on and then saw *her* lying amid the others, a spider much *larger* than the others. She a rounded hill, her white form bleeding through his senses. She too had been impaled, but by herself, bloodied fangs torn off from her jaws and thrust into her abdomen, leaving two ragged tears in milk-smooth flesh.

She had committed suicide. No one else. But why?

A word came to him then. It was the word Ira was repeating to herself. Then the word divided into two and he almost understood. The first word was prison.

The second word was murderer.

"Could it be an invasion do you think?" He turned to see the young woman from the restaurant. He shook his head.

"No, not an invasion. Ira simply lost her way."

"Can she be believed?"

"No," he said curtly, simply. "But can anyone? She stumbled through starlight and got lost along the way."

"Along the way where?"

"Don't know." By now he could have taken Liam to the hospital. Except they were in another country, neither completely knew the language, he couldn't really explain what was wrong with his friend and even if he did no one would believe him.

Liam was alive. Liam was breathing. Liam wasn't moving. Liam wasn't okay, but suspended upon all possibilities he was as good as he was going to get.

"Why is he like that?" she asked. "Was he like that before?"

"No, well yes. Started talking up a storm and then just slept, though this is clearly not sleep. No, she's in there with him, doing something to do him."

"Taking over his mind?"

He laughed a bit at that.

"I got the distinct impression she didn't know how. Seemed more like a child than a conquering alien monster. Or machine."

"Machine?"

The word hung nakedly in the air, waiting to be stifled. But Dylan didn't.

"Yes, kind of a machine, I guess. A missing gear left hanging out her head."

"That's a terrible line and you know it."

"True. But she did seem a bit vacant somehow. It was

when she mentioned what she did in her own home."

"What did she do?"

"She said she wrote."

"Oh, like you."

"No, not like me. She stalled before she got too far, but, no. Not like me."

"In fairy tales, true love's kiss wakes up sleeping princesses."

Dylan glanced up at the young woman quizzically.

"I can't tell you how many things are wrong with that statement right now."

"Worth a shot."

"You kiss him then." Dylan stood up. He had been beside the bed staring at Liam and now stood and walked toward the desk and sat down. This he did in the real world. In his mind he was already at the desk, her standing beside him.

"What's going on in your head Liam? What's going on in your head Ira?"

"How you going to save them? How you going to wake them up?"

"Sound and fury," he said.

"What?" the woman in his head asked incredulously.

Liam sat among scattered bodies and then turned back. The demarcation between her home and his came into view. He crossed it, coming again to the city he knew. And she was there. Book in hand.

She talked swiftly with a river of scattered words and ideas. But the crystalline heart of it he caught easily.

She hadn't known. Her people had been told as effortlessly as one might lie to a small child, that if this action was made they would take their rightful place among the stars. And that word had eluded her even as knives plagued-plunged into her as her

body fell-failed. She did not fault her sister in the act for it was not her sister's fault, or hers, as her fangs plunged into her own sister. It was the one who instructed them and taught them.

Their bloody murderer.

Everything else from this realization slid effortlessly into place. The terrible damnation of the act. The end of history. The empty world they left behind. The horror of what they were led along to do, strands of this action reverberating out forever.

They were once. They were no longer.

Across the smeared oceans of the sky, across rivers and shores of some forbidden planet, they would be again but they would be something else. Unclean. An army gifted toward possession.

And she had been exiled accidentally and instead thrown into his mind. And she screamed almost, the realization of her death finally haunting her, herself haunted by herself, by what she had been before and what she was now as Liam held her and led her back to the empty world she'd known.

There were all her sisters drowned in the blood cast off from themselves. And there amid the dying their murderer innocently explained the great migration upward.

"Who was she?" he asked.

"She was Chana, the maker of the days."

He was about to ask when realization flooded him. She was the fulcrum, the originator, the first step toward all others.

She was the focus of them all, each thing she did they did, each thought she had they had, she the borderline unchanged.

Chana was the template of an entire race.

So. When she said on that last fatal day to go to war, they had no choice but to obey. And since she was the originator, she had to plunge the daggers of her fangs fashioned directly into herself and rose upward as a wraith, ephemeral as air.

And they followed after.

They couldn't help but do otherwise.

Where she led, they followed.

She killed a continent in an afternoon and her children didn't know why.

Now he was here and realized he was locked in the labyrinth of this experience. How long had he been here? How long had she? It was time to awaken out into the living again.

But she stopped him, panicked to realize once he truly opened his eyes all this would not be but memory, glimpsed but never truly experienced ever again.

Once released to elsewhere all this would never exist again.

"I can't let us leave," she said.

"We have to. It's time."

That's when the music started. It wafted along the breeze, then grew louder; a terrible din. It was a ragged horrible sound and Liam recognized it but Ira didn't. She didn't know what music was. Not yet.

Song grew brighter, sharper, clearer, and the louder the song was the more dissolved the memories of her world became.

She wished to lash out at it, song about wheatfields, icy tundra, and he felt his muscles tightening puppetlike by her and with a snap, she rose out of the bed reaching for the small shells embedded in her ears.

But that hadn't been enough. The sound kept coming so she rose and reached for the music-making machine and he knew, as she knew.

They were both awake.

Her home was gone then.

With all his restraint he kept her from killing Dylan.

But it took all his strength.

Chapter Seven

After he had pinned himself against the wall restraining his muscles and fingers from ripping Dylan's throat out, after Ira felt the embers of her world decay, he stopped. She stopped.

She was no longer standing in fields of home but in this white prison of a room, the music gone.

"Welcome back," Dylan wanted to say, but didn't. He said nothing. An hour ticked by, something slow and visceral like the feel of molasses melting in the sun. The hour. An entire hour suddenly took on weight and smeared itself across Dylan's perception, and Liam's, and Ira's, and then the cool seconds solidified hard as amber and they started talking again.

Her world descended to memory and now she was utterly in sync with Liam. And he was focused not upon the past but now. His memories now were closed to her.

After the hour cooled to crystal, after Liam/Ira became collected, and after Dylan no longer feared for his life, they sat down and began to talk not about what was but what was to happen next.

Ira told them the plan. Liam understood part but now hearing it through his mouth he understood the horror of the thing which had been done to her, the horror which she became.

"Chana explained it to us you see. Said there was a war in heaven, that places once perfect slumbered into decay, one by one ruined and undone. Our world alone could be saved if we moved ourselves to a place untouched by corruption.

"So, we did. But we didn't understand death. Still, we did as she commanded."

"What normally happens when you die?"

"We pass beyond the rim of the dark, a few fleeting moments of nonexistence then awaken again upon our home as if death had been a dream. But this was different, not the flesh's end

point, not the perfectly arrived-at moment. We came too soon and were carried upward into void."

"Where was your destination?"

"Tarn-Ezra."

"So." Dylan stood up from his chair, crossing the room. Some of this she had already said, but only as fragments. Now the plot widened. "If they are on Tarn-Ezra what are they doing?"

"Taking possession of those who dwell there."

"As you were trying to do with me."

"But it didn't work. I don't know why."

"I do." Dylan turned back. "You said your home was uncorrupted. What does corruption mean to you, untouched by decay?"

"Perfection. The ideal."

"The ideal what? You were innocent and innocent beings can't conceive outside themselves. You were led to slaughter and never questioned it. I imagine those of Tarn-Ezra are the same?"

"I would imagine so, yes."

"Well, we of Earth are corrupt enough. We . . ."

"Have mysteries," she said.

"Exactly. I don't suppose you have mysteries where you're from."

"No, everything is always known. Nothing is unknown. I couldn't imagine the word until I read the book." She mentioned Oakfish.

"Of course. An ideal is something that cannot exist beyond the limits of itself. A circle unending and unbroken . . ."

"Dylan get to the fucking point," Liam said.

"Sorry. So, what do we do now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well human beings can't flit off into night. You're stuck together, the pair of you. We're in this city for a few more days and then we head home. What are we going to do here on in?"

Liam/Ira stood up and surprisingly said as one, “We are going home.” The difference between what home meant surprised Dylan and even them for a second.

Then Liam understood what she was saying and she understood what Liam meant. Liam was going to the city by the shore, to try to deal with his life, their life, somehow together.

Ira was going to find a way off Earth to reach Tarn-Ezra and bring her people back to their lost world, to rebuild their bodies, if possible, restructure their flesh, make their lives as they were again, if possible. Or die in the attempt.

Dylan grasped both meanings at once. It was going to the start of difficult times.

Chapter Eight

Liam returned to his apartment.

The room seemed smaller somehow.

Well, he had a roommate. That tended to make everything seem smaller.

"This is your world," she said.

"A part of it. Yeah."

There were bookshelves on the far wall and books he'd wanted to read but hadn't yet. A refrigerator sat sentinel in the corner. He opened it and drew out an apple and devoured it.

He glanced out the window. Buildings lay below like a lattice of squat grey or brown toads. She stayed quiet a time but now questions rose blisterlike in his head.

His job? Office work. He'd have to explain to her what an office was.

Siblings? She had a clutch of millions. He had a sister in some far-off place called Black Harbour. Her children were five and seven.

Children? He had no kids.

Lovers? What lovers, he asked. He'd always been alone.

Until now, she said in his head.

Since the two of them were in sync she couldn't simply probe his mind or wander in the garden of his memories. All this was now. Before was prologue so she had to ask and he had to answer, using his own voice to give evidence to her, herself a resident of his own mind.

He sat in an armchair and began to explain what they would have to do. He'd have to go back to work soon. She'd have to remain silent in his head or at least talk using thoughts. His voice was off limits for her use save in private.

"Welcome home," his boss said. It was funny imagining a

boss. She'd had an all-consuming ruler she had to emulate fully. The idea of someone telling him what to do and then not doing it himself . . .

It marvelled her.

Liam's job consisted of organizing files. The business aspects she never fully understood, not for lack of trying but words like files eluded her. This paper in his hand was alive after all.

The names, the dates were real names, real dates. But they existed here on the page. There was the real outside, real day, real person and there was this copy of one, copy of December 24, copy of Mr. John Smith.

It existed apart and yet influenced the real origin of itself.

Her story was the same. Except.

When the document was wrong, an error made, this didn't actually change the outer world at all. The document if in error could influence the lives of people, but there was a disconnect.

"Hey, this is wrong. It says I was paid on Jan 23rd but it was actually Feb 4th."

"Thanks."

A document could be in error. She marvelled at this. It wasn't fiction, it was unreal. It wasn't reality, it didn't line up perfectly with what was. It was a mistake, some misstep of the wheel and yet this didn't mean anyone was at fault.

An error happened, was allowed to happen so long as someone fixed it. And all the time she kept wondering what was happening to her people beyond the farthest star.

It would be easy to imagine all the little ways an alien can go wrong in a world. Countless stories are written of all the little mistakes a naive alien can make. One imagines comedies and mismatched awkward stories about the good little alien and how she ruins or fixes the poor human's life.

But the pair settled quite easily to the bare routine. He worked, went home, she asked her questions, they had lunch with Dylan, Liam mentioned he was making a book, and Ira mentioned she was looking for a way to Tarn-Ezra.

And Dylan mentioned he was doing the same.

He scoured ley lines, lost cities and mentions of spider women or anything suitably bizarre or uncannily clean. The last he looked for because it summed up her people perfectly.

But Earth had never been part of the design she said, had never been a planet like her own.

How would she know, he countered, Liam listening in. And then Liam said it was time for them to go. Their lunch hour was finished and it was time to go to work. On they went.

The bare routine was mired by the hope to leave, corrupted by the knowledge they were stuck together. She said her peace at night, he worked in the day, she listened to all the ways the files could go wrong and Dylan kept working on his poetry and more.

And then Ira noticed the first inklings of religion.

Chapter Nine

One night in January Ira took Liam's body and wandered the dark streets without quite knowing why. She went until she came to a cathedral which was like the skeleton and torn-taunt skin of some primordial leviathan inverted to the ground, and past the jaws of that great dilapidated beast had wandered inside, passing where people sat in worship. She came to the pulpit where was the book and started reading.

"In the Beginning . . ."

Here two hours passed, one hour on one side of midnight, one hour on the other.

Then she left.

It hadn't occurred to her why the doors were open. A priest had been at work in a far room. He never noticed her standing there reading. In the silence, it seemed they were the only people on Earth and they never noticed each other.

Then Ira walked out into the snow and later softened into his bed, drifting along the ocean of his sleep. By now she had almost forgotten the form she once had.

After that, she poured over religions making dissertations of varying faiths. They all seemed the same and they all seemed different. And they so often went to war against each other.

This idea of war fascinated her, that ideas could go to war.

But more. For some religions were dead. The goddess of the winter winds and the eternal night was no longer worshipped anymore. Others too had once been revered but now their forms and functions were taken down, discarded or reused.

She read voraciously and asked her questions and Liam and Dylan explained the nature of religion to her.

In the past people didn't understand the forces of nature. Thunder and lightning ripped across the sky and men and women

didn't know what caused this, so a god was born to explain a portion of the universe.

The ocean? The same. Earthquakes likewise. And eventually, some imagined a single god made everything. Including a perfect world. An ideal.

"But then creation fell," she said.

"Kinda."

They were in Dylan's room. Liam had the latest book in hand, a copy of the Gita.

"The problem with these stories is one has to explain evil. And to do this, Ira, one has to either have a god who creates evil, a god who is evil, or a god who is incapable of stopping evil."

"Sin," she corrected him.

"Well yes. Sin. And sin becomes the sign of evil and falling away."

"But there is much more to it than that," Liam said. "You see we have evidence of what our world was like before. No garden of Eden. No ideal perfect state. Five thousand years ago our people lived in stone houses. Ten thousand before that, caves. Life was hard before. No writing, no machines to speak of. The further back in the past one goes the worse the world seems."

"But why then do the books say what they say?"

"People want to believe," Dylan said. "They want to believe and out of that belief, people imagine they find truth. Maybe they do. I don't know. Hard to believe myself."

"But you write unreal things."

"Well, that's the crux of the matter, isn't it? If someone knows the story isn't real, they can believe in it enough that it matters to them. And they won't care if the story isn't perfect or if things don't make complete sense because it's only a story and a story doesn't always matter.

"But if they think it's all real and then reality comes along and proves it false, well . . . then they must either side with the

book or with reality. There's no middle ground. Usually in religion, the book is revered because it is supposed to be true and since truth is an ideal there's no limit outside of itself. It must be and what it is not must not be."

"And if the faith is wrong?"

"Reality rears its ugly head," Liam said before Dylan could finish the thought he'd made earlier.

"Then why believe?"

"Because," Dylan said as he went to the door, opening it, "otherwise one is stuck with just a mediocre little life bordered on one side by birth and the other by death and one knows they don't really matter that much in the grand scheme of things. Religion makes everyone important enough to matter to the gods. Even if that importance translates to damnation. Even if gods hate them."

"It's time to go to work," Liam said.

Ira agreed.

It was time to go to work.

Chapter Ten

Ira began to craft her own mythology one day in spring. She started with the Bible and then began to change it. The garden of perfection covered all the ground. Since serpents didn't exist in her world, she used a small black-bodied fly which was usually consumed by her kind.

It had deceived the ideal ones. Why not Chana? Because she was trying to line up the human story and God had not deceived his chosen ones. Later perhaps she'd make her god more evil, but not now.

A flood. After corruption a flood. Oceans of bright silk tangling all but the worthy. Then a small remnant of survivors cast adrift to rule a new world.

New laws of conduct. New ways of being. A thousand generations condensed to the trappings of a few lives.

Then the story of some redeemer, some perfect daughter to set the path toward an utter redemption . . .

"I think I found something," Dylan told the pair one day.

He mentioned he'd found some most unusual caves.

They travelled north, as Ira and Liam continued talking. It was odd, she said, seeing all the little similarities etched on one faith or another, yet still they went to war.

"Well, there's always hell," he said, "or heaven."

She said she remembered places like that.

The three of them journeyed north past long stretches of forest, past mountains in the far distance like great giants like the wardens from some primordial other-place.

After three days of driving, they came to the foot of the mountains and climbed a short way to the caves. Journeying in they marvelled to realize the walls within were bright, yellow and luminous.

"Welcome to the Cyas Caves," Dylan said. The three of them went deeper inside.

This was hardly the first place he'd found. There had been other hidden scenes which supposedly led to some other mythic realm. But this had been the most obscure.

He didn't know what they would find but it hardly mattered. Like all issues of faith, an expectation of hope trumped the reality of despair.

And Liam had a few weeks vacation so it wasn't like there was anything better to do.

They wandered within and the caverns opened up the wider, walls like the taunt-torn skin of some primordial leviathan.

As they walked the yellow-gold bright luminescence gave way and forms appeared behind the now glasslike walls.

They were like those of men but faceless save when eyes appeared, sometimes on their faces.

"What do you make of that?" Dylan asked.

The forms danced about or walked toward them and Liam imagined he would panic but didn't. Nor did she. Something familiar came to them.

They were the haquil.

"You know, just saying, when I imagined we'd find something unusual this didn't come to mind."

One of the haquil came directly before them and behind it spiralled out grey and scarlet and white spirals of worlds.

Of course, the caves were not like this usually. They were normally dull and dark and small and cramped but now they occupied a chamber twice as large as a great cathedral and the wanderers between the *All* had focused all their attention upon them and the Cyas Caves were opened now.

To swallow them inside.

Liam/Ira without knowing put hand to stone where the alien hand was pressed against the other side and suddenly walls

wax-dissolved to the palm of the alien's hand which they felt, and Liam caught the whole of creation in his garment then.

Dylan reached out and grabbed Liam's left hand before it was too late. Before the pair of them were drawn into another world.

Chapter Eleven

He beheld creation and knew there wasn't one world, one Earth, one Dylan. There were trillions, each divided and different and unique and strange. On some Earths, he was not a mammal but a bird flittering in the sky. On others, he had died in the trenches of Verdun in a war which never ended.

On another, he was a jaguar, an oak penning verses into his own flesh.

On one he had been a spider.

A door opened in another land and they passed through and Ira realized where they were. They were upon Tarn-Ezra.

Behind them, the Caves appeared then shimmered like golden glass and were gone, before them the ocean and to their right stood the lofty citadels of a great pearl-encrusted metropolis.

"I guess we should find your people," Dylan said, walked on, and stopped. He sounded so pathetically small in that statement. Liam walked beside him and then Liam too stopped.

Dylan reached into his book and drew out something he hadn't remembered bringing with him. A book. His own notebook tossed through of ideas. And as he skimmed over it, he noticed the pages kept continuing. It wasn't just his notebook. It was all his notebooks drawn together. The whole of humanity's literary history had been thrown into his coat like an afterthought.

Suddenly he grinned and a huge weight lifted from his shoulders and turned to Liam and said, "I guess we've got to save your people."

And then he ran while dumbfounded Ira and Liam just came tumbling after him.

Chapter Twelve

A butterfly was flittering on the breeze metallically, composed of shades of gold, patches of violet, red and blue, and this miniature harlequin insect fluttered on ahead while they walked toward the city.

And then as they walked, he began to recite a poem about little flittering things crossing the underside of the world, arriving in the fiery depths and then passing through to the paradise beyond where the demons could not follow them.

He forgot who wrote the poem so assumed he did.

The ground as they walked seemed oddly coloured. It was grey bleeding into white, and pale. At first Liam/Ira didn't know why they seemed familiar and then realized. This was the same colour as the dead where the bodies of her people lay.

They came to the rounded walls of the city and at the gates, two figures stood, grey-skinned. They wore bright armour and each had a spear in hand, topped with metal wavy as a leaf in an autumn breeze.

As the three came to the gates the spears crossed halting their approach.

"None enter," one said. "None leave," another added.

Ira looking through Lim's eyes felt a pang of remembrance.

"Malkreth?" she asked. "Is it you? And are you not Taeleish?"

The two guards, each pale youths, glanced to each other and then turned back to Liam and Dylan standing there.

"Ira Amraire?" they asked in unison. Liam/Ira nodded.

"Ira Amraire," Ira said.

And the spears were uncrossed and the two youths came to stand before the three strangers and got to talking.

They had come to Tarn-Ezra as promised to save this

world from the corruption devouring at the edges of the night, had fled into the bodies of the ezrans and taken possession of them utterly.

But not everyone had been taken. There weren't enough. Small rebel groups existed beyond, challenging them and so the cities had to be defended.

After so long it seemed their life's work was bleeding into insignificance.

For they had no other purpose but to wait and be.

Two guards stood at each gate waiting for their enemies who never seemed to come, while within the possessed knew not what else to do but go on living their lives, halfway as a spider, halfway as the ocean-crossing fishers by the shore. They had remained as such, stranded on one side or the other between forever and forever.

And how many bodies had the two possessed?

They had lost count.

That fact sickened Dylan, Liam, and Ira more than anything else.

"Let us by," Dylan said. "Take us to your fucking leader."

Chana occupied some luscious soul, dark of hair, her skin oddly marble in its grey tone. She stood upon a throne and was arrayed on each side by the strange mysteries of her servants, beings who once had copied her and now obediently did other than she did.

She had her hall upon the topmost tier of the topmost tower and as the sun came sliding snake-ike in, three strangers opened the doors beyond and entered into her dominion.

They came within the grey walls and strode toward the upraised dais and its golden throne, itself a mirror image of the spire-sharp towers whose foundations glistened from the ground.

Ira as she came toward Chana recalled what she had seen

outside, her sisters trapped in lives they barely understood but unlike her, they had utter control of them.

The ezrans had fled into oblivion at the touch of her sister-kind, leaving them occupying dead bodies, empty continents of flesh, and in that grave emptiness, they struggled poorly on. For they from beyond were stranded by the unending fear of living one body after another while those before their oblivion cried out in the prison-homes where they were bred, to be free.

And Ira in her heart promised them they would be.

Liam as he approached also noticed the empty city, empty of meaning anyway. There were watchful sentries atop the walls waiting for attackers to come who never would as the growing panic bled into everyone.

Were this the corruption they had supposedly fought against he wouldn't be surprised

As he crossed the threshold to see their queen, he knew what he would find; someone panicked, flicking her anxiety like spoiled wine in every glance. And she had ruled as such supposedly forever.

He doubted she'd last longer than a few days now.

As for Dylan?

He wanted to fucking kill her.

The book itched at his hand and he knew how he would do such a thing.

"I was told it was you Ira, who returned."

"It is I," Liam/Ira said.

"Your flesh is not like those of the ezrans. Wherever did you go?"

"She came to Earth," Dylan said, stepping forward, "the world my friend and I came from. I must say, you don't impress me, child."

A guard came forward from the wall and struck a rod

against the back of Dylan's legs, toppling him.

"One does not address a god that way," she said.

"Oh please. You are not a god, Chana."

At her name, she stiffened. Her whole body became rigid as Dylan spoke her true name.

The guard was about to raise the spear to strike when Liam stood between his friend and his murderer.

"It's you, isn't it, Khurueltua? I remember you, how you used to be."

"I am the servant of our goddess."

"If she is a god then have her possess me!"

All turned to stare at Dylan as he spoke.

She rose from her throne and came down to see him, the scarlet of her robes brushing small oceans of dust aside, dust that had lingered here as if in a thousand years she had not moved at all.

Of course, that's what it had been. Time had moved so quickly here. Half a year on Earth and a thousand in paradise.

She knelt down to him, face to face, black eyes staring into his own and he realized she must have expected him to show some sign of terror. Instead, he stared into her coldly, realizing the depth of her absence.

"Come then," he said, "come into me."

And she did.

The great ephemeral form of the spider rose up as her human host decayed to black pools of dust and she resided over him and he looked up as the great pale body subsumed itself in a brilliant flash of lighting into his own.

And the murderer of her kind made then her second mistake.

There was the sound of bright laughter glistening and glittering in the sun and a metallic golden girl standing statuelike

nearby. There were shadows but languishing in sorrows and black chains and grey walls again. Chana realized she was on a metallic world of gold except it was like no world she knew.

It was not the machine world of Morcaria nor like any other.

"Where am I?" she asked.

Dylan walked toward her and she realized she wore not her human form nor the spider's skin but appeared exactly like he was. She had his face, his form, his voice.

And he sang then.

"Last of all my sins
is lyrically contained I find,
implicit in design.
That's all we
get in love and life, all we have,
love of having been, my love.
The love of having been."

More words came, an infinite speech in the valley of invention he tossed to her. And because she had his form, she caught it and did as he would have done.

She read.

She read of Iago and Macbeth, of Tammuz and Enkidu and Enheduanna, and because she was older and more powerful than any mortal mind what she read she held contained within herself.

And she saw what he had done, her prison and her prisoner.

Worlds he made.

There was King Crinaon who governed a living isle which once had been a great turtle but now had twisted into something else, moving across the waters seeking hope.

There was a silver country where an insect baby in the

womb of a mad woman screamed.

There was the continent of sorrow upon the winds of time inhabited by demons who had lost their way and meekly wandered through decay, having nothing else to do.

And finally, there was a country where history had been created long after the world was. Change had come after the birth of things so that before this change even though things were, they had never been.

One piece after another she terribly understood. All she was smouldered to a blackened point. All she had been was rounded now by action, a circle without beginning or end, the only choice given herself was to blister along her children a terrible conceit, an end without ending.

It was over.

She had changed, broken.

Dylan stood up then, Chana whispering brokenly in his head as he ordered the guards to lay down their weapons and go home. They lay down their weapons and left the hall. But it wasn't what Dylan meant.

Later that afternoon he drew the entire "invasion" force to the mirage of the Cyas Caves and let plunge their spirits and bodies through, while Liam and Ira went exploring for the rebels.

But no rebels were left.

The entire world was empty outside of a handful of cities.

The ones untouched by the invaders were freed, a half-broken race meant now to dwell in a world mostly empty.

And in the world of the spider-kind, an emptiness lingered there too.

The entirety of Chana's rule had been brittle as a branch. The tiniest pressure would have snapped Tarn-Ezra free.

But freedom in an empty world is not freedom.

Afterward, Liam and Dylan stood on the Earth a moment,

contemplating.

"I guess this is the end," Liam/Ira said.

"No. No, not the end at all." Dylan turned back toward the Caves. "The door is still open. They are still leaving it open for us. We weren't meant to save one planet or two. I hear her Ira, Liam, in my mind. Chana was just one of many. Each has something like her on it. Tarn-Ezra had such a being till usurped by Chana herself.

"There is a war coming, something corrupting, devouring at the edges of the night. So many worlds have fallen. The gates between are meant to be closed but someone disagrees. We're meant to go out there Liam, Ira. We're meant to go face this thing."

"What about my people?" Ira asked.

"No one would believe a poet if he said anything. How about a couple thousand people, a couple thousand aliens? Could anyone dispute that?"

"What are you saying?" Liam asked.

"We have opened the doors to two others and they haven't been closed. We can cross back to Tarn-Ezra as easily as walking across a room. And if we can do it so can others. We can bring three worlds together."

"Usually that ends badly Dylan. Conquest, disease, destruction."

"For us or them? I'm serious. I can hear her inside my head, what she was. She was desperate, terrified. She killed her world out of fear Liam. And others have done worse. We stopped her with a book. We can do more. We should.

"We can save a universe. But we can't do it by being alone."

"You're serious?"

"Yeah."

"This could destroy more than it saves."

"Worlds are empty Liam. What's worth saving is already being destroyed."

The four returned to the cities of the south and later brought a few scientists up who passed beyond the doors to Tarn-Ezra, to Yuyutsula.

And they believed.

And a decade passed.

By then the whole world believed.

Part II.

Chapter I.

"Never confuse the greatness of the artist with the greatness of the man."

Taarn-Estria sat by the shore, book in hand. It was *The Malachite Prince and Other Poems*.

Her grey fingers wrapped round pages bred of butterfly wings, metallic gold and scarlet and blue with black ink. She had read it before as had her daughters, mothers, and grandmothers.

And this was always the first line.

She glanced up to see a plane pass by. Thousands of years before small gatherings of humans had arrived. They had strange skins, some black or pale, some with hair like butterfly wings and they had been told about her people.

And they had been welcomed.

Of course, though more came they came at a glacial pace.

From the time it took for Liam and Dylan to convince first one group of scientists and then another, centuries passed on Tarn-Ezra. So too upon Yuyutsula and its moon of Kiersen.

Now however the spiders called it Portia and the moon they called Shylock, human names etched subtly over their own.

There was some grand story behind the names but she never heard it. Perhaps it wasn't important beyond that those who once ruled her planet had taken on the guise of stranger things.

Of course, as the humans came through the Cyas Caves her people increased their numbers. A generation doubled from almost nothing to almost something. In five generations, in ten, in twenty, in a hundred? The humans who came were a thin thread stitched from another land to this. Some came because they were afraid of where they came from. Others because they wanted something new. Others because they wanted someone new.

Each generation as the humans came more of the ezrans and the humans bled together.

By now her lineage stretched back to three planets. There were the conquerors who broke apart the former days and her own people who had dwelled here before, and the humans who came, adapting or changing or remaining the same, or trying to help piece together what had been lost before.

And some made planes. And some made telegraphs. Some learned how to make ships like the ezrans did, speak as the ezrans had, or act as the ezrans were. Others didn't. But there was still so much room, Tarn-Ezra having twenty continents.

And by now her people numbered twenty billion souls.

As for the days before, the days of peace and plenty governed by their god-king? Those things were gone forever and never could they come again.

She glanced up to see a plane pass overhead, a silver raven whining through greying skies, then turned grey eyes to the sun, slid a slender hand across the book and kept on reading.

Chapter II.

Change was the birth of history. Across the universe, there had never been change. There had been existence but existence was without deviation or error. As such change was the reality of history.

The certainty of death.

For if nothing changed one could not remember anything. If one day or season mirrored the other, what did it matter if you could tell a date apart? If one lived, died and lived identically what did it matter if one had done this one time or a billion?

History was the subtle asthmatic rhythm of events, surging and struggling with possibilities. And at the end, however different, there was an end. So out of history memory was born.

Whether upon Portia or Tarn-Ezra one remembered the past. There was a slow recall of past peoples, the tastes and disgusts and lusts and wormwood hopes of them.

If before the corruption all was heavenly then heaven was a terror without purpose.

With change one was aware that the ebb and the flow mattered, hope and loss mattered, memory and forgetting mattered, because they would not come again.

Life became the possibility of something else, some other track along the wheel, going in a direction one desired.

For the memory of living is the life of them. But more.

Memory is what makes the best of ourselves. All memory is subtly false, glimpsed but never seen. Where before each was trapped in the wheel now the wheel had become a labyrinth and the labyrinth of three worlds stretched on forever.

It was the birth of the divine chance to make mistakes.

Chapter III.

"When life is atrocity, a mercy killing is a sensible way to go."

Liam scanned the lines and Ira didn't like them. Neither did he. There was something wrong with them. He glanced to see the sun rising and realized he hadn't slept again.

A whole night had slipped by and the pair of them had been hard at work testing the limits of their craft.

"There are a thousand ways to be corrupted, there is only one way to be redeemed, by never having been."

Dylan had left that line for him. It hardly seemed fair. Ira suspected it had not been Dylan's line but Chana's.

"I'm not going to sacrifice potential happiness for actual happiness."

No. Liam/Ira got up and stretched. By now ten years had passed. They were feeling older.

Portia had become inhabited again. On those times Liam/Ira visited they were greeted by their billions. The human forms they had taken with them had multiplied and the essence of her people had splinter-evolved.

Those of Tarn-Ezra changed too. Each time they visited more people were added to the latticework of a new humanity.

It was hardly perfect. Nations sometimes fought amongst themselves. People got angry. Hate sapped the strength of the young and the old sometimes. Murders happened. Adultery and lies. But no one longed for the days before.

No one.

It was an odd contrast standing where Eden supposedly had grown and to know no one, not a single soul wished to return to that. But then when one stood upon Earth, when one wandered in the snow and the summer and the sand always was there that subtle tearing for a home that never was. For a promised land.

By now Portia and Tarn-Ezra had become as commonplace as anyplace on Earth. One thought of them as being part of the world. For the Cyas Caves moved after all.

Sometimes they appeared in the northern countries, and sometimes in the south. The haquil had a sense of humour. In certain war zones, refugees vanished. At first, it was assumed one side or the other had slaughtered the innocent, but no. Instead, they emerged amid isles of trees or by grey waters where their would-be murderers could not pursue.

It was an odd logic watching people slip between and knowing how much, how little control each planet had over the other. Time moved differently here or there. Some sped up clocklike or slowed down. But after a decade on Earth, eons elsewhere, it became routine.

Liam/Ira stretched and didn't know what to do.

Despite what one might imagine being the discoverer of great mysteries didn't pay well. Of course, elsewhere Liam's book was appreciated but here he was a young writer poorly known. As for Ira, she too wasn't regarded too fondly.

Not for being an alien.

She was unemployable, having no skills she might use.

Helping to save the universe didn't fit well on a resume.

Having finished with the incomplete work as best they could the pair went, showered, got dressed and left. They slipped to the street and snow and trudged to where Dylan was waiting.

As they passed, they greeted grey-skinned women and small children who had oddly black eyes like spiders might.

When they reached the café, they ordered coffee and sat down by the window, staring at the soft scattering of white.

It was December again. But it wasn't the same December at all. It seemed each day was a different country, the geography slightly altered, an isthmus different here where Liam met that nice blond woman, a mountain different there where Ira longed

for home. December 24, this December 24 differed from the previous and the previous and the previous.

Tomorrow would be a new day the same and unlike any day they'd lived before.

Dylan/Chana arrived, sat and ordered something sweet.

Chana had been imprisoned now for ten years in his head. At first, she had been broken, the full extent of her crimes splintered and thundered into his skull. The fear had been real though, grasping terror eating at the edges of the night, and something had to be done. But it was the wrong thing. Something now that never could be righted completely.

But the terror beyond lingered on.

"How have you been?" Liam asked pleasantly.

Dylan smiled. Ira and Chana never spoke to one another and never used human speech to talk. Chana had long since become an exile among her people. She was unwelcomed on two worlds. Dylan had become her jailor. It was a role he relished.

And so only the two men spoke.

"Been well. Visited that old place where it all began. A lot has changed."

"I imagine so." It was hard not knowing what to say. Liam hadn't seen Dylan in months and the longer they'd stayed apart the more the taciturnity had hardened between them. Not beyond Dylan and Liam but between Chana and Ira. While the two men talked it was like half their minds were stilled and emptied and ready to strike.

As such, conversation had to be somewhat bland, for now.

As they spoke, outside they watched black spider-eyed children playing in the snow. Colonization had gone both ways. Many ezrans had come to Earth and many of the spider-kind. The portians they called themselves now. The old name had been discarded utterly. The memory of it had been obliterated as if in an attempt to erase the shame of their origins and their initial

demise.

"It's still out there you know," Dylan said quietly, "the thing she's afraid of. The corruption."

"I imagine from its point of view an eternity has passed."

"Maybe. Maybe." Dylan glanced back. "You know being stuck here I've had time to think. Lived in my head more than usual."

"More than usual?" Liam asked.

Dylan smiled at that.

"Thing is, I've seen glimpses of what Chana saw. There are so many worlds out there and yet we haven't been able to reach them. I don't know why exactly. But I have a theory."

"The haquil."

"Yeah. They've been investigated and studied but we can't figure out what they are. All we know is they opened the door for us to walk through."

"And saved two other worlds as a result." It was odd talking like this. Liam felt half his head missing. Ira had crawled to someplace else he couldn't reach. She was like a homunculus curled and nestled in his mind.

"Thing is, I think it's time for us to do more."

"Do more? How?"

Dylan glanced outside at the children playing. There had never been snow on Portia. Now the children couldn't imagine the absence of such a familiar thing.

"I've been wondering Liam, what happens when I die."

"I imagine the same thing that happens to everyone else."

"We're not so sure."

"We?"

"She's not like Ira, Liam. She's not like an ezran or a portian or a human. She was linked, is linked I suspect. When she died, she opened the door and when she killed . . . him, when she killed him, I think she opened another door."

"Him?"

"Him."

Malgern, the seed-origin of Tarn-Ezra, the first expression and first breath of that other earth. Chana had dismantled him, leaving the wraith of him suspended unknown amid the skies.

After his extinction, they had all brokenly fallen into place behind her. But what had happened to Malgern even Chana could not truly say.

"Why this concern, Dylan?"

"I went to the doctor a few days ago. Cancer."

He glanced back to the children playing.

"How long do you have?"

"If I went back to Portia I would just die faster. Doctor figures six months. Less."

Ira glanced outside, then back to Chana.

"I'm sorry," she said, surprised at herself, realizing she was addressing her own murderer with pity.

"I'm sorry too," Chana said, and Ira realized she was not sorry over dying but over what she'd done.

"You think you can go back to Portia, that you'll be allowed back?" Liam asked.

"I hope not. I want to die here on Earth. Specifically, I want to die north."

"What do you mean?"

Dylan rose, his skin suddenly seeming grey a moment, then pale, then dark, as the lamp overhead shifted his features slightly.

"Think about the logical steps Liam, how our worlds joined together. Chana aimed at Tarn-Ezra and hit her target with aplomb. Ira accidentally slipped through space to come here. That's what linked it all together. But I have in my head a map, showing not two or twenty but hundreds of worlds."

"You're like an engine," Liam said.

"Not here, but there I might be."

"In the Caves?"

"Yeah. That's why I came. I think I can direct our course this time, to somewhere else. If . . ."

"If you die."

"Dying anyway. Hell, I've been dying all my life so it's not really news. But I want you there with me Liam. I want you there, to help."

Liam/Ira rose then and Ira drew out her hand. Without thinking Chana extended her own.

"It would be my pleasure," Ira said, "to be there when you die."

"I know," Chana said. She was hardly surprised.

Chapter IV.

They went north, passed green forests, sky blue as a robin's egg, and stepped to the foot of the mountains. It wasn't like a decade before. This portion of the Caves was occupied, people milling about, rushing from one planet to another.

Time swam here, slowed, molasses-crawled, sped to a clocklike ticking that never stopped. Because Dylan/Chana didn't know what was going to happen no one was told. Although of course, the haquil knew. A portion of the cavern jutted off, a limb emerging which unconsciously Liam and Dylan's feet drew to as if beckoned to a flame a moth might be.

In the empty portion of the Caves Dylan sat down, cross-legged. He drew out a dagger.

"This was how she did it," he said. It was a thin silver splinter like a leaf wafting in the wind.

Dylan looked up, his lips trembling.

"You don't have to do this," Liam said, not certain why he was only saying this now. Perhaps it was because now more than anything Ira wanted to see her die. Two divergent thoughts splintered in their head; see a murderer die, see a friend go away.

Chana could have been put in prison, could have been executed, except she already was. She had been imprisoned in alien flesh for a thousand years, gone mad and alone and afraid. And she had died.

What else was there to do to her?

And Dylan? He was her friend and he was sitting on rough stones which luminously glowed orange and yellow and he was on the precipice waiting to end himself. And all Ira could do was . . .

"Wait." Ira sat down by Chana. Dylan was forgotten by her and Chana was forgotten by Liam.

"Wait," Liam said.

"You don't have to go into the dark alone," Liam/Ira said, to Dylan/Chana. "We're here. We're with you."

"I don't think, if you go with us, if you try to go with us . . . it'll work."

A haquil appeared, hand pressed against the wall of stone. Noticing this the four turned back to what they were going to do.

"It'll work," someone said. They didn't know who.

It'll work. A knife slid across a throat, then two.

Liam felt himself falling backward and imagined perhaps he had been bitten by a snake, that somehow a snake had bitten him and his body was being released upward into the void above.

Dylan felt likewise and Chana clutched to his throat her fingers and fell away.

Ira alone remained a moment then she too followed after as the haquil stared at the bodies and then glanced up, hopeful, dismayed. Hopeful.

The next step had been made.

Chapter V.

He felt cool hands of a death clutching him but something held it back. He turned to see that he was in the shadow of something vast and spiderlike, holding his death at bay.

The Caves prismed now along the kaleidoscope of countless realities. Gazing down he could see people streaming from one corner of the room of a universe to another. Out beyond he could glimpse other rooms, each one another universe.

The prism-prison shattered as Chana their map went searching for some other place. Out beyond he caught glimpses of himself in other universes.

In some, he had never met Ira at all.

In some his soul had been cast upward to be occupied in a spider's form.

In one he had ascended to this exact point where he was now, two Liams, their stories almost the same. Except gazing inward Chana occupied Liam's body, and Dylan and Ira had become as close as flesh or skin.

The other pair dissolved back to their own universe, descending the stairs to their own small room, the small labyrinth of possibilities to either redeem or die or be damned, and gazing down he realized they too were falling fast.

Gazing down he could see Tarn-Ezra and its moons. Two moons orbited the grey world, and upon both were slender moth-winged creatures, almost humanlike who grew from cocoons suspended from amber-brittle trees.

But this was before, near the origin of time.

He was glancing into the past and Malgern was striding atop the waters and Liam realized he was not only seeing Tarn-Ezra but all the myriad realms beyond.

I can see home, Ira said. It was true. Portia was nearby, the isles of trees, but spiders crawled about. No human footsteps

could be found. It was the past. No, a memory.

Glancing beyond other worlds could be seen.

Three worlds slung together like pearls on a string, of forests and oceans and mountains whose people were violet-skinned with black tattoos etched about their eyes. They seemed so calm, a peaceful silent cacophony and yet Liam knew this was a memory. A giant strode by, crossing all three worlds and then returned and crossed them again. The first child of these errant planets. The template for entire races of beings.

Then Ezriel, grey shrouded atop corpse-ground, dour people wandering from crypt to crypt except he noticed smiles along their lips. This was not how they were supposed to be. Time was running closer to something less than memory. That was Dylan, he knew. They were coming upon the source of corruption soon.

Sthrenobog came next, moors and grim-lipped fields, but the world was empty here. It seemed as if nothing had survived. Even Ezriel held life, though taking on the appearance of the dead.

This was followed by another, and another, of the savanna and the scarlet moon above, by the lions of Lukhara now rendered into bones. Onward they sped then. Onward toward . . .

Toward the heart of the disease that had killed so many worlds.

They were coming toward Haggratha.

Suddenly Liam felt feet not his own touch the earth. Dylan stood nearby, though he did not look like Dylan now. Chana's flesh had been restored.

Liam imagined he too must have been rendered to pale flesh, to jewel-black eyes. But no. Ira/Liam gazed down to see a woman's body. The skin was neither pale nor dark but a tanned brown bleeding into iron.

They were upon a rocky shoreline and behind them great

fingers of stone rose up, jagged as black clouds.

"We are upon Haggratha," Chana/Dylan said.

And then without thinking Ira/Liam wished to come upon the mountains, and was.

Without realizing she turned back, feeling with smooth fingers something jutting from below her shoulders. His shoulders.

They were wings.

Chapter VI.

Haggrathra seemed to be a dark mirror of Tarn-Ezra. It too was occupied by continents and shores but the land was rocky, jagged and sharp like broken tarnished gold. The ocean beyond was not a soft violet-grey but a black obsidian, glass sharp storm-riddled. And there seemed no cities here.

With great spiderlike tread Chana/Dylan climbed broken peaks and crossing to the other side a bleak valley lay beyond.

Ira/Liam had already flown about, scanning from the dim clouds the broken countries below.

Beyond Chana's form, it seemed no other life existed save itself. Herself? Himself? The body they occupied should have held some spark of life. But nothing was here. Had it been obliterated? Had she been destroyed by Liam's touch?

No. No, even before it felt as if nothing were here, as if the rough outline of her body had grown as seafoam on the shore meant to occupy Liam's soul and Ira's own, to give shape their dreams somehow. Now they came upon the countries below and all the rest of the land seemed empty. But not empty.

Chana crossed to the heart of the valley and stopped. Ira/Liam descended to her. To them.

"What are we looking for?" Ira asked.

"It was here," Chana said. "This was where it all began."

She circled about, great pistons of her legs making small indentations in the dull ground. Her body dwarfed that of the winged woman and the two thin black daggers of her mouth dripped poison as she spoke.

"We were here, all of us, having seen the first signs of corruption. He had come here first, the World-Ender.

"We were made from the worlds. The very earth gave birth to us. But he gave birth to them." Chana was no longer speaking alone. For some reason, all this had been closed to her

children and in revealing all this Dylan was giving her his strength.

"He made us to be a perfect ideal resonance, unchanging and unflawed. Then he came here, all of us in the trail of his garments and we saw he was displeased.

"He had fashioned dominions of every colour. Even of colours you cannot imagine. Of every shape. Of every size. Of fire and water and earth and air. Planets of red forests and blue women and green soldiers making mock wars in great jungles which breathed and grew and drew up the sounds of their brittle, metallic laughter. All to him.

"And yet he was displeased.

"He put a prison here and placed those who could create in the prison and tore apart their wings.

"He railed at the failures of us," she turned to stare at Ira/Liam, "and all those of Haggratha, all those he placed here to wail and we watched and fled in terror. All of us. We watched and fled in terror."

As Chana spoke a sound was heard. It was the sound of many wings in the night. Glancing up Liam imagined winged women in the cloud cover might be seen.

"But why?" Ira asked.

"We never knew. From here he spread outward, one world at a time. Pain and suffering come amongst his creation. I thought . . . I thought if I could escape our bodies, we might take a world untouched. But that was not how things were meant to be."

"Meant to be?" Dylan asked. "Nothing is meant to be."

The sound of the wings continued and grew in cacophony. And then from across the dark side of the valley the figure could be seen of a man dressed in black, coming toward them.

"The World-Ender," Chana said.

"Sure, whatever," Dylan added.

The devourer, the corruption was upon them.

Chapter VII.

He appeared with the full force of terror written in his every step. He imagined they would cower in fear, shudder at his passing. There was little Chana there crumpling at his coming.

But she wasn't. She was standing looking at him and he couldn't feel her fear. And there was some survivor he hadn't dismantled yet. She wasn't showing any fear either. He rose, his whole body filling the sky and thundered out a warning to them to flee in terror before they died. They didn't run.

The sound of wings he could hear and didn't know why.

Then he shrunk to a smaller form and stood before them.

"I am the destroyer of worlds," he said.

"Pleased to meet you. My name is Dylan," the form of Chana replied.

"And you?" the devourer asked.

"I am Liam, and Ira Amraire. We have come for you," the woman replied.

"You have come to die."

"Done that once," Chana/Dylan said, circling about the form, "in fact, we've done it twice. Though I suppose three times a charm. Want to try?"

"You seem different Chana. Unhinged. I suppose it was to be expected. I saw your lands die."

"Oh, well, ever hear the story of Lazarus? Wonderful tale."

"Lazarus? No."

Idly, without noticing Liam felt the fingers of the hands itching and glancing down realized a book was there. It was the same book they'd had on Tarn-Ezra ten years and eons ago.
It had slipped through, passing to him, or rather to the body they were now occupying.

"Lazarus was a man who died, laid in the tomb for three days and then revived. I don't know why he wasn't saved sooner.

Guess his friends didn't make it there on time. You know," Chana turned to stare at the dark figure then, "I had nightmares about you I couldn't understand. Whole years whose sleep was determined by you. She couldn't say your name though. She hid so much of it from me. I knew she was afraid but finally, she came here to confront her fears, I guess. With me by her side."

The sound of wings grew still louder now.

"I'm afraid you've come to your end. For I created all things and all I created deserved to be mine."

"Ah! Yes, there's the rub, isn't it? That's what I thought. One creator to another. So hard admitting you can't own what you've made.

"But I think there's more to it. Don't you?"

"More? Who are to question a god?"

"Me? I'm just a poet. Just a man of wealth and taste. But you . . . you're hardly a god. No, not a god at all."

"Oh? And what would you call the maker of all things?"

"Impotent," Dylan replied.

At that the form rose up as if to crush them and then suddenly the wings took form and they were standing amidst countless women, all winged like hawks.

Standing amid their number Ira/Liam felt kinship with them. They hadn't been killed. Instead, they had been torn apart, their essences left to scatter in the sky. He wondered, they wondered how many were thus where life had been dismantled and left to scatter in the sky.

The World-Ender imagined he would but reach out his hand and quell them but something stopped his hand. She wasn't afraid. Why wasn't she afraid? Haggrathra was his throne. He ruled here and from here he needed but reach out his hand and disrupt his creation as he deemed fit. But these were not the tailoring of his creation. They were something else.

"What are you?" he bellowed.

"The first step I guess," Chana's form said. And then Dylan/Chana understood.

There were rooms after all. Each universe had seemed a small room, all linked to the nexus of the ancient Caverns. Perhaps they existed in every point of time, of space, of memory.

But he had cheated. This World-Ender had sealed off his creation from the larger expanse. He had closed a little corner of a tiny room and imagined he governed the great infinite mansion of infinite paths. He thought because he knew a corner of a room, he understood the great halls where *All Things Were.*

And the only way to pierce the wall was if something native from his creation had slipped through, like Ira Amraire. And now? Now something had slipped back to the heart of his dominion.

A small child with black jewelled eyes suddenly emerged and put his hands in the hands of one of the winged women.

Without realizing it the boy and she dissolved away, back along the corridor of the Cyas Caves.

Then an ezran appeared. A thousand years before her ancestor had sat reading a book by the shore as a plane passed by. She spoke quietly to a few of the women gathered there and then in a flash of movement they too were gone.

Startled the World-Ender roared but no sound came.

Chana had walked the path of course. Not only the places she had named. All of his dominion she touched subtly as she went, opening each door to the larger universes beyond.

And suddenly they heeded and they obeyed.

A collection of humans emerged upon the machine world of Morcaria and drew off a remnant of the silver ones, leading them to a country near a black harbour.

A lone woman found herself upon the sands of Sarmarkhris and amid griffins and sphinxes neath the shadow of alien pyramids she drew them back to Portia and in their wings, a

great multitude followed, while two lone silver moons gazed down like loving, longing eyes.

Monk-shrouded ground suddenly uprose with the sound of laughter as one by one they passed beyond the veil, led hand in hand with old exiles, young children, and strangers in a stranger land.

And then Chana noticed her upon the far peak. The original seed. The first spark.

Haggrathria he had left her imprisoned in the sky. But some older hand had shaped her again into a living form.

"What are you?" the World-Ender wanted to cry out, but no sound came. He had shrunk to the size of a man, hollowed by a terrible experience.

Haggrathria came into the valley then.

She stood before her father and wept bitter tears and then Liam reached out his hand to her and she took it. And they fled upward, backward into the corridors of worlds.

He pointed to a place to go called Earth and she went speeding onward as Ira/Liam returned.

She would not miss the end of things.

By now only they were upon the valley of the end.

A great black flame rose upward, black fire etched into his form. And Ira/Liam slapped him across the mouth. It was such a stupidly perfect thing to do, the utter sentiment of what this monster truly was.

There was no great battle. No monstrous war.

Without realizing it, stunned, Chana and Ira took the monster hand in hand and drew him far amid the stars.

And he saw it, himself, themselves straddling upon the nexus of all things, and there was the tiny room they called a universe and embedded in the room a small inch of a corner he imagined his universe.

But it wasn't a hundred realms, or a thousand, or more.

It was nothing but dust enveloped in a shadow-scattered remnant of a form. Just dust. He gazed upon galaxies in their infinite spirals and with a sudden rush of anguish saw them all freed from his shadow to become part of the true creation again.

And in that moment Liam handed the book to him and without comprehending he read.

He read everything, everything that was and each story was an unending universe inside itself, each story inside another story, each story going on forever. And when one idea was made another followed and when one story was ended another started and out of one mythology a second blossomed or blistered or grew alongside or submerged beneath or branched into a third. And of this, there was no ending, nor an ending of any created thing.

He stared at the book, the entire universe there larger than all he'd made and the room disappeared and he was confronted with the infinite beyond.

Suddenly there were unending universes and he saw himself in some. In one he had wandered all creation and added simply what little he could. In another, he had accepted the passage of time and allowed his dominion to change. In a third he had experienced the loss of innocence, the knowledge haphazardly contained that whatever he was would not come again.

In another he ended himself, imagining it a merciful act for the grim torture of his imperfect life.

Another came, another like him. He glanced up to see this bright shadow and then more and more and for a moment Liam imagined they all looked like the children who wandered in the walls of the Cyas Caves. But he wasn't really sure and it hardly mattered anyway.

Then the World-Ender was gone, but his tears remained.

And when the World-Ender ended they were again upon

the Earth they'd known before they'd died.

The second time.

Except now Chana's form was her own and Dylan's his own.

And Liam saw the winged woman standing beside him as suddenly she flew into a bright dawn.

And a pale-skinned woman stood beside him then.

"Ira?" he asked. She nodded. She glanced down at herself to realize she was human. Then Liam took a step forward, noticing the spiderlike movement of his form.

Their forms had switched. Or did he want to be this shape? He recalled the decade past, all else forgotten save his thoughts of her. And she did likewise while Dylan stood beside Chana and both turned back toward the Caves.

There was something they had to do, something they always should have done but had been unable to.

As they noticed Liam's and Ira's forms changing, but to what the poet and the goddess did not know.

Chapter VIII.

Chana walked upon the sky. Dylan walked beside her. Below them time had passed, how many centuries they couldn't tell. But there amid clouds, Malgern was in agony, waiting.

He had seen time pass, revolving about the prison she'd left him.

With a flicker of her form, he was restored and they stood there beside the shore as grey water licked at their feet and cities strode behind them like old titans waiting to be redeemed.

No words were said. In a flash he saw all she had done, all they had become, saw the end of the World-Ender and the penance she desired. To be forgiven.

A serpent seemed to lick about her feet and she imagined again the daggers at her throat, how it had seemed a serpent had crawled there to her to release her form ephemeral to air.

He had lain for untold centuries watching, imagining all he might do to her. He had seen his children perish in the guise of her children's minds and then watched as these strangers came amid his people, changing all things forever.

He could have enacted such vengeance as neither gods nor mortals could imagine, but he did nothing but simply turned toward his people, ignoring her. He fashioned her as dead, as a ghost, some memory of some terrible thing never to be recalled again as anything but nightmare.

He'd never forgive her. He'd never regard her as anything again. No time spent was wasted on seeking revenge against dead things.

Dylan sat upon the sand and began to sing an old song about a place called Verdun. She listened and understood. And joined him in the singing.

All were open now.

There were fire moons and moons of water and children of insects and jungles and sunken cities where mermaids swam.

Some realms seemed only inhabited by ghosts and yet the ghosts often were given flesh. Perhaps the memories of the dead just clothe the living? How could you prove if a man or woman was, unless you remembered them, and if you remembered were you remembering them or what you imagined they had been?

The World-Ender was gone, taken up into whatever justice awaited his kind.

Perhaps he was judged and found wanting. Or perhaps he simply wandered the corridors of the Cyas Caves forever, watching but never taking part again in the creation he had made.

Time by now had slowed.

A year on Earth became a year on Tarn-Ezra and Portia. It was as if the wellspring of all the other places had piled time atop those two, but now that each was freed time was free again to slow and move at her usual pace. A day on Earth mirrored a day elsewhere, give or taken an hour or so.

And Liam and Ira went wandering down the corridors of things between the places they had known and never knew. They wandered from desert to mountain to jungle to city and all the cities seemed alike in their own ways.

One day, in fact, the two of them sat and realized they had come to Earth again, to the city where they had met. And they looked so alien, so strange and familiar by now.

They sat and drank, and talked about the old times which seemed so very long ago and far away. Then noticing the lateness of the hour they walked to the door, leading each other out and stared a time at the waiting endless stars above.

And then they flew away.